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Strategic Stories

How 3M Is Rewriting Business Planning

GORDON SHAW, ROBERT BROWN, AND PHILIP BROMILEY

Executive Summary

Virtually all business plans are written as a list of bullet points. Despite the skill or knowledge of their authors, these plans usually aren’t anything more than lists of “good things to do.” For example:

- Increase sales by 10%.
- Reduce distribution costs by 5%.
- Develop a synergistic vision for traditional products.

Rarely do these lists reflect deep thought or inspire commitment. Worse, they don’t specify critical relationships between the points, and they can’t demonstrate how the goals will be achieved.

3M executive Gordon Shaw began looking for a more coherent and compelling way to present business plans. He found it in the form of strategic stories. Telling stories was already a habit of mind at 3M. Stories about
At 3M, we tell stories. Everyone knows that, in our earliest days, a share of 3M stock was worth a shot of whiskey in a local St. Paul bar. We tell stories about how we failed with our first abrasive products and stories about how we invented masking tape and Wetordry sandpaper. More recently, we've been telling the story about one of our scientists who, while singing in a choir, wished he had bookmarks that wouldn't fall out of the hymnal—and later created Post-it Notes.

We train our sales representatives to paint stories through word pictures so that customers will see how using a 3M product can help them succeed. At employee award ceremonies, we tell stories about the programs and people being recognized to explain what happened and why it's significant.

Maybe our story-intensive culture is just an accident, but we don't think so. We sense that it's central to our identity—part of the way we see ourselves and explain ourselves to one another. Stories are a habit of mind at 3M, and it's through them—that is, through the way they make us see ourselves and our business operations in complex, multidimensional forms—that we're able to discover opportunities for strategic change. Stories give us ways to form ideas about winning.

So it's remarkable that we typically discard storytelling when we do our strategic planning. After all, that's the formal process by which we lay out how we're going to win.

At one level it's odd, but at another level it isn't at all, since virtually all businesspeople plan using lists, outlines, and bullets. In any event, over the course of several years overseeing strategic planning at 3M, Gordon Shaw, the lead author of this article, became uncomfortably aware that 3M's business plans failed to reflect deep thought or to inspire commitment. They were usually just lists of "good things to do" that made 3M functionally stronger but failed to explain the logic or rationale of winning in the marketplace.

He began to suspect that the familiar, bullet-list format of the plans was a big part of the problem. After critiquing hundreds of plans, he started to look for a more coherent, compelling way to present them. With strategic narratives, he found that form. (See "The Science of Stories" at the end of this article.) Individuals in parts of 3M now use strategic narratives in their planning processes, not only to clarify the thinking behind their plans but also to capture the imagination and the excitement of the people in their organizations.
What’s Wrong with Bullets?

In every company we know, planning follows the standard format of the bullet outline. It fits the way we’re used to writing and presenting information. It’s economical. It reduces complex business situations to a few, apparently clean points. It allows for conversation around the issues and gives presenters the freedom to move, modify, clarify, and revise on the fly. In a sense, the bullet list may be an artifact of the way business takes place in the course of strategic planning: it mirrors the character of meetings and the high-pressure pace of the manager or planner who must reduce the complex to the short and clear.

So what’s the problem?

If the language we use in writing strategic planning reports were only a matter of presentation, of the way we package ideas and offer them to others, it would not matter much how we wrote them. But writing is thinking. Bullets allow us to skip the thinking step, genially tricking ourselves into supposing that we have planned when, in fact, we’ve only listed some good things to do.

Bullet lists encourage us to be intellectually lazy in three specific, and related, ways.

Bullet lists are typically too generic; that is, they offer a series of things to do that could apply to any business. They fail to focus an organization on the specifics of how it will win in its particular market. Witness this selection from a planning document submitted by a 3M business unit. The planners proposed three “major strategies”:

- Reduce high delivered costs:
  - Reduce international parent head count by three.

- Explore sales cost reductions,

- Determine vision for traditional products and appropriately staff,

- Continue to reduce factory costs,

- Refine unit cost management system,

- Reduce process and product costs.

- Accelerate development and introduction of new products.

- Increase responsiveness.

What’s proposed is so general that it could fit any business at any point in its maturity, and, by the way, the bullet points are not vague because we’ve disguised proprietary information. This is a typical level of detail for business plans. Basically, these planners propose to keep doing good things faster, cheaper, and with more attention to the market.

The problem here is not incompetence; good managers drafted this plan. They know their business unit and, if asked, could probably provide the detail to turn an empty phrase like “determine vision for traditional products” into a story about market analysis, positioning, and strategic action. But we can’t tell that from their plan.

Neither can their executive reviewers. And, more critical, neither can the people who need to get behind the plan and make it happen.

But any of these abstract proposals could be part of a powerful strategic plan. If “increase responsiveness” means “improve on-time delivery,” for example, it might set a company apart from its competition—if the norm
in this business is to be late and unpredictable. But we certainly can’t tell that from this plan.

Bullets leave critical relationships unspecified. Lists can communicate only three logical relationships: sequence (first to last in time); priority (least to most important or vice versa); or simple membership in a set (these items relate to one another in some way, but the nature of that relationship remains unstated). And a list can show only one of those relationships at a time. When we present a list, either orally or in writing, we leave other critical relationships unspecified. Our audience can fill in the blanks from their own view of things, or we can do it, adjusting what we say to the responses we receive from them.

Sometimes, this approach can be politically savvy, making the list palatable to a variety of people who may have different points of view. Lists leave us room to move and, in moving, to protect our sense of mastery, certainty, and control. However, in the end, lists present only an illusion of clarity—and it can be an expensive illusion. If the plan doesn’t specify critical relationships among issues, it can’t demonstrate that we really know what we’re doing or where we’re going. We can’t see the whole picture.

Bullets leave critical assumptions about how the business works unstated. Consider these major objectives from a standard five-year strategic plan:

- Increase market share by 25%.
- Increase profits by 30%.
- Increase new-product introductions to ten a year.

Implicit in this plan is a complex but unexplained vision of the organization, the market, and the customer. However, we cannot extrapolate that vision from the bullet list. The plan does not tell us how these objectives tie together and, in fact, many radically different strategies could be represented by these three simple points.

Does improved marketing (for example) increase market share, which results in increased profits (perhaps from economies of scale), thus providing funds for increased new-product development?

\[
\text{Market Share} \rightarrow \text{Profits} \rightarrow \text{New-Product Development}
\]

Or maybe new-product development will result in both increased profits and market share at once:

\[
\text{New-Product Development} \rightarrow \text{Market Share} \rightarrow \text{Profits}
\]

Alternatively, perhaps windfall profits will let us just buy market share by stepping up advertising and new-product development:

\[
\text{Profits} \rightarrow \text{New-Product Development} \rightarrow \text{Market Share}
\]

These different models make radically different assumptions about how the world works. Indeed, these three simple items—profit, market share, and new-product development—can relate in many other plausible ways as well. Without being clear about which set of assumptions they favor, planners cannot seriously think
through their plans. Without knowing which assumptions the planners are making, senior managers cannot seriously evaluate or modify the plans. And without understanding the business assumptions, subordinates face just another list of objectives without any confidence that those goals can be reached—and without an essential sense of excitement.

The Narrative Logic of Strategic Stories

Planning by narrative is a lot like traditional storytelling. Like a good storyteller, the strategic planner needs to set the stage—define the current situation in an insightful, coherent manner. That involves analyzing the industry’s economics, its key success factors, and the forces that drive change. It also involves defining basic tensions and relationships: Which capabilities and objectives do we have and which do the other players have? What do we believe the other players intend to do? How do our key success factors compare with those of our competitors? Some of these factors are straightforward, but others involve complex analysis.

Next, the strategic planner must introduce the dramatic conflict. What challenges does the company face in this situation? What critical issues stand as obstacles to success? In some cases, the main challenge will be exploiting new technological opportunities. In other cases, it will be coping with high costs in a commodity market.

Finally, the story must reach resolution in a satisfying, convincing manner. The plan must tell us how the company can overcome obstacles and win. The conclusion requires a logical, concise argument that is specific to the situation and leads to the desired outcomes.

Requiring that a plan have a narrative logic forces to the surface the writer’s buried assumptions about cause and effect. The act of writing a full, logical statement encourages clear thinking and brings out the subtlety and complexity of ideas. Indeed, sometimes we sit down to write believing we have a clear idea, but our difficulty in getting it down on paper exposes the flaws in our thinking.

Presenting a plan in narrative creates a richer picture of strategy not only for the plan’s authors but also for its intended audience. Readers are made privy to the author’s thought processes, so they know far more than they would if they read a bullet list. When assumptions are made explicit, they can be discussed and held up against senior managers’ own mental models. Executives are in a better position to evaluate the plan critically, ask more penetrating and insightful questions, and offer more useful advice. As one 3M manager said, “If you read just bullet points, you may not get it, but if you read a narrative plan, you will. If there’s a flaw in the logic, it glares right out at you. With bullets, you don’t know if the insight is really there or if the planner has merely given you a shopping list.”

A word of caution. For this approach to work, the story can’t be just a list of bullets connected by “and then, and then, and then...” Rather, it must be a recasting and rethinking of the parts of the plan and their relationships with one another. It must tell a story of a struggle between opponents in which the good guy triumphs by doing a series of smart things in the right order.

Bullets Versus Strategic Stories: An Example

A good story has a point that becomes clear through the telling. Likewise, a good plan lays out a vision—not just a generic platitude, but a fully enunciated statement of how the business creates value. Rather than reflecting an
inward focus (for example, "to be the leading supplier of widgets"), the vision says how we will make a significant contribution to the customer.

Consider, as an example, our Global Fleet Graphics Division. Once upon a time, the substantive piece of the 1992 business plan for the division might have looked something like this:

- Increase our market share from 40% to 50%.
- Regain product-development leadership position.
- Increase sales closings by 50%.

Today we would craft the plan in the form of a narrative. Although what follows is highly condensed, and it is partly disguised (all the numbers have been changed, for example), it illustrates the value of telling a strategic story:

[Setting the Stage] Global Fleet Graphics makes premium, durable graphic-marking systems for buildings, signs, vehicles, and heavy equipment. The corporate logos and graphics we see on fleets of package delivery trucks, tractor trailers, and airplanes are typical examples.

Fleet Graphics now faces more demanding customers and more aggressive competitors than it has in previous years. Customers want design flexibility and larger graphics without higher cost. Some customers want easy-to-remove products, while others want durable ones. Bus operators want graphics that cover the windows yet still allow passengers to see out. Total sales of graphic materials have increased, but sales of traditional, painted graphics have declined due to their high cost. 3M has 40% of the market and for some years has been the technological leader.

Fleet Graphics faces three major competitors: AmeriGraphics, GraphDesign, and FleetGlobal. AmeriGraphics has begun to expand its product line by using our older technologies as the patents expire. Its global share has grown from 10% in 1982 to 16% today. GraphDesign uses direct distribution and new manufacturing capability to compete on price but has experienced quality problems. Its market share has dropped from 18% to 15% in the last ten years. The quality of FleetGlobal’s products is comparable to ours, but they sell at a lower price. Its share has grown from 24% in 1982 to 28% today.

In short, we are losing our patent advantages at the same time that we face three strong competitors that are using low-cost strategies.

[Dramatic Conflict] Without radical changes, Fleet Graphics will not be profitable in the near future. We can expect rapid price erosion once all competitors bring very similar products to market. Given 3M’s higher overhead, we cannot compete in a price-competitive business without a technological advantage.

Our vision: Incremental product or process improvements will not solve this problem. We plan to transform the industry through several technological advances. At the heart of this transformation will be a move from analog to digital printing-and-storage technology. In addition, the quality and economics of the final product will be improved using new film and adhesive technologies. The strategy we propose draws on diverse areas of 3M.

First, we propose a quantum change in Global Fleet Graphics’ production system that will allow us to deliver products much more quickly and at a competitive price. Rather than focus on cost reduction through incremental process changes, we have tried to rethink the entire way we produce fleet graphics. We have contacted
numerous R&D areas at both the corporate and divisional levels to locate appropriate and adaptable technologies. The search has resulted in a radical plan for a new, more flexible, lower cost graphics-production system.

Many graphics will be produced and stored digitally. We will convert manual, analog, silk-screen printing into digital form by scanning the art and cleaning it up on a computer screen. We will then be able to send it digitally anywhere in the world. Global Fleet Graphics will create a central repository of images that can be electronically transmitted to production facilities worldwide. IT estimates that the system will cost $3 million and be operational in 24 months.

The repository dramatically decreases product delivery time from as much as four weeks to as little as three hours. It also drastically reduces inventory.

Second, we propose development of a new generation of patented technologies and products to differentiate our offerings from competitors'. Three such products are already in the works. We are in the late stages of developing adhesives and films that can cover windows but allow people to see out. Only the final product-definition and design work still need to be done; design should be completed in five months. Manufacturing has begun to work on production facilities to ensure adequate capacity worldwide.

In addition, we are now close to answering our customers' need for graphics that can be applied to many nontraditional surfaces (such as corrugated truck sidings) and flexing surfaces (such as European trucks with canvas sides). Films for these applications already exist in our labs.

Last but not least, new adhesives will make graphics easier to install. The Adhesives Division has a product that remains tacky for a time so that graphics can be positioned and repositioned. When the placement is correct, a second adhesive system is activated to bond the graphics in place. The repositioning capacity decreases installation time by 30%, resulting in substantial cost savings.

Third, we need to upgrade our sales and marketing staffs' skills to match their capabilities with the technology-driven strategy. We will put substantial effort into field testing and marketing. Technical, marketing, and sales personnel will field-test the new products both domestically and overseas. Simultaneously, we will develop and test modifications to the product as well as produce sales and other supporting documentation.

Before we launch the new products, sales, marketing, and technical-service personnel will train all sales reps in how to use and sell the new technology. Training will include both technical and communication skills related to calling on top-level executives: reps will receive intensive training in how to talk those customers' language, and they will also be able to handle technical questions on their own. Training will begin one year from now, and we expect it to take six months.

[Resolution: How We Win] To summarize, Global Fleet Graphics has drawn on diverse technological skills at 3M to create a proposal for transforming its business. What has been a hard-copy, analog, design-materials business will become a more fully global, digital, electronic-imaging and repository business. Combining new films with new adhesives will create substantial value and reduce overall cost in both the manufacturing and application of graphics. By these means, Global Fleet Graphics will maintain and enhance its profitability and its industry leadership.
We believe that this new graphics system will radically transform the industry in a manner consistent with 3M's overall corporate strategy—regaining technological advantage on both the product and process fronts. The competition may duplicate some parts of this strategy (for example, the electronic storage of graphic images), but that will take time. We should have an advantage for several years even in those areas. Other areas have patent protection, and our advantages can be sustained for a decade or more. [End]

Even such a condensed narrative demonstrates the relative complexity that a strategic story reveals. When readers finish the complete narrative, they will know how 3M intends to increase its market share from 40% to 50%. They will know which product and process developments should, when combined, launch a new generation of fleets graphics. And they will be able to imagine that, given those new products and processes, as well as new training opportunities, sales representatives might well improve their performance by 50%. Just as important, readers will understand that hundreds and hundreds of players must contribute in order for the plan to succeed.

In a recent 3M survey, employees asked management to “allow us to get excited about where we are going” and to provide evidence of management’s confidence and excitement about 3M’s future. We believe that casting our plans for the future as compelling stories can help us do just that. The ultimate success of our plans depends on how effectively we inspire the people who make those plans happen.

This final role of narrative plans—generating excitement and commitment in both superiors and subordinates—may be the most important. A well-written narrative strategy that shows a difficult situation and an innovative solution leading to improved market share can be galvanizing—and it is certainly more engaging than a bulleted mandate to “increase market share by 5%.” When people can locate themselves in the story, their sense of commitment and involvement is enhanced. By conveying a powerful impression of the process of winning, narrative plans can motivate and mobilize an entire organization.

The Science of Stories

Stories are central to human intelligence and memory. Cognitive scientist William Calvin describes how we gradually acquire the ability to formulate plans through the stories we hear in childhood. From stories, a child learns to “imagine a course of action, imagine its effects on others, and decide whether or not to do it” (Scientific American, October 1994). In a very fundamental way, then, storytelling and planning are related.

Stories also play an important role in learning. Language researchers studying how high school students learn found that the story-based style of Time and Newsweek was the best way to learn and remember. When the researchers translated American history textbooks into this format, they found that students recalled up to three times more than they did after reading traditional textbooks.

Cognitive psychologists have established that lists, in contrast, are remarkably hard to remember because of what is referred to as the recency and primacy effects: people mainly remember the first and the last items on a list but not the rest of it, and—more dangerous yet—
their memory is guided by their interests. They remember what they like or find interesting; they do not recall the whole.

A good story (and a good strategic plan) defines relationships, a sequence of events, cause and effect, and a priority among items—and those elements are likely to be remembered as a complex whole. That likelihood, supported by a substantial amount of cognitive science, argues strongly for strategic planning through storytelling.

**Building a Story That Works**

Robert Brullo, a 23-year 3M veteran, needed to figure out what to do about his division's relationship with Hoechst, the German chemical company. Since the early 1980s, his fluoropolymer group had enjoyed a cordial arm's-length relationship with Hoechst, which had been first a supplier, then a manufacturer, for 3M. That arrangement had worked well for a long time, but it was no longer enough.

Hoechst had recently developed a new resin, called THV, that remained flexible at very low temperatures. It was a product with huge potential. Hoechst, however, did not have the skills necessary to develop or market applications. 3M did. Simply acquiring THV did not make sense for 3M; the cost was too high, and Hoechst already had a manufacturing facility, which 3M would not want to duplicate. A joint venture between the two organizations might ultimately have made the most sense, but Brullo knew that 3M does not enter into such agreements easily or often.

Brullo thought about how to resolve the business issue facing his division. Whatever he decided, getting senior management behind him would be a challenge. He realized that a bullet-style plan could not elicit, or reflect, the serious thinking he needed to do. He decided to write a narrative-style plan instead.

I said to myself, I'm going to write this like a book—make it like a story—so that anybody can pick up the plan, read it, and understand our situation.

Brullo talked with subordinates and read related business plans. He wrote the plan on his own, though. His description of writing that first draft captures the painful, exhilarating process of thinking through a difficult problem:

I'd sit there knowing it wasn't coming, and then all of a sudden I'd have a flash of brilliance. I spent two days at home just getting my thoughts down on paper. I had sheets and sheets full of ideas. Finally, I started writing out the actual story.

Brullo spent two weeks working on his plan. Once he'd written a 30-page draft, his subordinates critiqued it, and he rewrote it more than once, preparing to present the plan to the company's senior management.

On the day of his presentation, he began by turning off the overhead projector and saying, "I'm going to have fun today." Top managers started whispering that they could see a disaster coming. The business unit involved highly complex science, and it competed in a highly complex industry, so following a detailed plan would have been challenging for the audience had they been listening to a less talented storyteller. However, Brullo walked them easily through descriptions of the players, the critical issues, and the proposed resolution.
He knew the material cold; his carefully crafted stories had become part of him.

By the end of the presentation, top management was on board. Brullo's presentation became the foundation for a joint venture between 3M and Hoechst. An observer at the presentation reported later:

When Bob got up and presented, I could see the strategies to win. I could see these strategies changing the basis of competition. I could see the critical issues being identified, and I could see the key success factors for that part of the business. People could see the connections as he went from one section of his presentation to the next. They could see how the business was evolving, and they could see, ultimately, how the business was going to win.

Brullo says:

To me, the point is to communicate an insight, not simply a bunch of numbers or a bunch of bullet points. It keeps coming down to the same thing—you have to be able to show that the insight is there.

Dyneon, the new joint venture, was formed in August 1996. Managers developing the new organization over the coming months met with far less mistrust and misunderstanding than most international joint ventures involve. The narrative allowed them to identify potential problems. For example, the strategic story highlighted the importance of addressing specific needs of users in the automotive and semiconductor industries. From its inception, Dyneon jumped on those issues, establishing teams that included people from both companies.

Today Brullo leads Dyneon as its first president. The 600-employee, $350 million business is almost two years into the joint-venture agreement. 3M is the majority owner. Thus far, Dyneon's financial and operational performance has surpassed expectations. Brullo has used the narrative format in subsequent strategic plans as the basis for two other joint-venture proposals. One of those joint ventures has just been completed.
Open Linguistics Series

The Open Linguistic Series, to which this book makes a welcome contribution, is 'open' in two senses. First, it provides an open forum for works associated with any school of linguistics or with none. Linguistics has now emerged from a period in which many (but never all) of the most lively minds in the subject seemed to assume that transformational-generative grammar—or at least something fairly closely derived from it—would provide the main theoretical framework for linguistics for the foreseeable future. In Kuhn's terms, linguistics had appeared to some to have reached the 'paradigm' stage. Reality today is very different. More and more scholars are working to improve and expand theories that were formerly scorned for not accepting as central the particular set of concerns highlighted in the Chomskyan approach—such as Halliday's systemic theory, Lamb's stratificational model and Pike's tagmemics—while others are developing new theories. The series is open to all approaches, then—including work in the generativist–formalist tradition.

The second sense in which the series is 'open' is that it encourages works that open out 'core' linguistics in various ways: to encompass discourse and the description of natural texts; to explore relationships between linguistics and its neighbouring disciplines such as psychology, sociology, philosophy, artificial intelligence, and cultural and literary studies; and to apply it in fields such as education and language pathology.

The series, then, is committed to the concept of a fruitful interplay between theory and use. This book makes a significant contribution to the series in that it is the first to illustrate the use of linguistics in education—and in particular in the field of teaching writing.

Open Linguistics Series Editor
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Functional Approaches to Writing Research Perspectives

Edited by
Barbara Couture

Frances Pinter (Publishers), London
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Part I
Describing the functions of written language

1 An ethnographic study of corporate writing: job status as reflected in written text

Robert L. Brown, Jr. and Carl G. Herndl
University of Minnesota

1.1 Two problems in business writing

Scholars and practitioners of business communication are well aware of the varieties of discourse practiced in business settings, ranging from simple memos and letters to complex proposals, procedural manuals, and reports. And, of course, they also know that a number of conventional writing strategies are accepted as more effective than others in most business writing situations, strategies such as organizing information from general to specific and using strong verbs and few nominalizations.

Though many accept conventions for effective on-the-job writing intuitively, researchers of technical communication have begun to confirm these intuitions empirically; these conventions do help readers process written prose (for a summary of recent research that links style with readability, see Selzer 1983). Further, corporate managers, responsible in many ways for the quality of writing in an organization, have responded both to the research and to the advice offered in technical and business writing textbooks in urging their staff to follow the recommended strategies—as our own investigations in fifteen Minnesota corporations confirm.1

Given that the effectiveness of certain conventions in technical style seems accepted by both scholars and professionals in the workplace, we present in this chapter what we initially encountered as a puzzle and offer some possible solutions. In our preliminary interviews with training-and-development managers and technical managers in fifteen corporations, we learned that bright, able professionals were often quite resistant to adopt some style conventions believed to characterize effective professional writing. Four corporate training-and-development managers and three technical managers we interviewed cited two common writing behaviors reflecting this resistance:

• After being told that their writing is ‘verbose’ and ‘muddy’ and after learning in seminars how to recognize and eliminate SUPERFLUOUS NOMINALIZATIONS in their writing, corporate writers continue to fill their prose with such structures.
After being told by their supervisors that narrative structures are unacceptable in executive reports, recommendations, and proposals, corporate writers stubbornly continue to narrate the entire project.

Psycholinguistic, text-processing research has concluded that nominalized prose is more difficult for readers to process (see Coleman 1964 and 1965). And common sense (guided by pragmatics) tells us that it is harder to infer a course of action from a long narrative text than from a set of summarizing assertions or recommendations. Our informant-managers emphasized their faith in these assumptions and in their writers’ general intelligence and ability. Why, then, did their writers seem to act against their own best interests in refusing to adopt these conventions?

This seemingly irrational behavior intrigued us. Our informants told us of their employees’ consistent success with time-management seminars, with oral-presentation courses, and even with aspects of writing and communication other than those we cited as troublesome. To a writing teacher or linguist, it appears quite straightforward to define the inappropriate linguistic structures—excessive nominalizations or narrative structures, say—and then to suggest change. Why did writers resist this change so strongly when they seemed receptive to other instruction?

We guessed that we were missing the center of the issue. Since the formal case was so straightforward, we inferred that stylistic and discourse features preferred by these writers must have complex cultural sign functions; the choice to use such features was not simply guided by the wish to achieve clarity or ease of reading. We set out to define what political and psychological forces motivated the language behavior, believing that an ethnographic study of the corporate environment might reveal the information we needed.

An ethnographic study explains a phenomenon in terms of a culture. We assumed that the corporate environment is a culture unto itself, an assumption well-supported by Deal and Kennedy (1982), Bormano (1983), and Hymes (1984). Beyond this basic assumption, we allowed no others to shape our activity. We did not, for instance, begin with fixed hypotheses. Rather, following Kantor’s construction of ethnographic research as an hypothesis-generating activity, we allowed our interviews and textual analyses to ‘shape, alter, and refine’ our investigation (Kantor 1984: 74).

To ensure our sensitivity to bias, we began with two warnings to ourselves. First, we considered that the political/psychological function of discourse differs from culture to culture and that our cultural biases blind us to other cultures’ constructions of linguistic reality. Because we are members of an academic culture, necessarily influenced by our culture’s view of things linguistic, we could not assume that corporate writers and technical professionals saw things our way (see Goffman 1971). Second, we considered that our models and metaphors for linguistic description can blind us to the phenomena we study. For instance, our models for linguistic-empirical research suggest that we should define a formal structure, isolate it from its cultural context, and then reify its independent existence (see Shuy 1981). Such a study of superfluous nominalizations or inappropriate discourse structures would undoubtedly confirm them to be merely unhappy formal choices from an inventory of forms in free variation.

Our preliminary interviews with the corporate managers suggested the guiding loci we needed. Our informants clearly identified their skilled writers and used their work to illustrate points about writing and communication. Our informants also clearly cited power relations—and the anxiety they produce—as problematic. Hence, we began our work predisposed to examine how language establishes and supports such relations in the corporate culture, reflecting and perhaps determining writers’ roles in their workplaces. And we decided to trust our informants’ intuitions. When they identified a writer as skilled, we listened. When they showed us what they considered good writing, we accepted their word; they should know, they are responsible for effective communication in their units.

Our preliminary interviews suggested two aspects of the cultural context which strongly related to writing behavior:

- the writer’s status in the work group as a central peer or admired worker as opposed to just one of the ‘other guys’ in the shop, and
- the writer’s anxiety, variously caused and frequently related to job security.

We aimed to investigate how these aspects of the corporate culture might affect writers’ use of superfluous nominalization and inappropriate narrative structures. Our emergent conclusion, simply stated, was that these language features had acquired such powerful and favorable significance as signs of group affiliation that writers lost sight of their effects on readability.

What follows is a trace of our investigation—our theoretical speculation, our interviewing, our text analyses—and an argument for the culture-centered ethnography of writing which emerges. We remind the reader that our work suggests theory, not the conclusions of empirical research. Working in the traditions of Greicean pragmatics (see Greice 1975), sociolinguistics, and ethnography, we suggest motivations for language behavior generally and for professional writing in particular. Also, our work is speculative, not conclusive. We report what we consider significant tendencies in writers’ behavior and their intuitions about why they behave as they do.

1.2 Definition of Analyzed Features

The text features of superfluous nominalization and inappropriate narrative text structure are nearly perfect candidates for sociolinguistic investigation. As we will explain, these features can be monitored easily and show clear political/psychological significance.

1.2.1 Superfluous Nominalization

In technical and professional communication, writers are often advised to use strong verbs rather than create superfluous nominalizations, that is,
nominalized forms of a verb with dummy verbs inserted to preserve their verbal function in the sentence. Here are some examples of verbs converted to superfluous nominalizations:

- observe → make an observance,
- examine → undertake an examination, and
- announce → provide an announcement.

Superfluous nominalizations contain the usual morphological markers (e.g., -ence, -ism, -ment, -ant, or -ist) and always occur in 'verb-direct object' syntax. Unlike other features associated with muddy writing, such as strings of prepositional phrases, strings of relative clauses, passivization, and technical vocabulary, superfluous nominalization is seldom justified by rhetorical strategy or discourse structure. Further, constraints of grammar and syntax do not require writers to nominalize. Nominalization also makes text-processing slower by adding additional transformation complexity and bulk. If our training and development managers' reports are right, their writers know that they should avoid nominalization but nominalize anyway. We can only conclude that their behavior must be otherwise motivated.

1.2.2 Narrative structures

Narrative structures are texts organized by time sequence. Clearly, narrative structure is appropriate in response to rhetorical situations that require recounting events over time, such as documenting a procedure. We studied documents where narrative structure was not required and yet the writer adhered to it, even when asked—often ordered—to do otherwise.

1.3 The nominalization study

1.3.1 Method and results

We conducted our ethnographic study of nominalization in two Fortune 500 corporations with very different management styles and products. One—a computer and business-service company—is widely diversified. Here, largely autonomous divisions compete sharply for business both within and outside the corporation. The other—an agricultural, commodities, and consumer goods company—is far more informally organized. Reporting relationships evolve from the current business demands and differ from group to group. Here, personal style is informal—first names are used at all levels; one manager described the atmosphere as "like a small-town."

We interviewed in three steps. First, we contacted twelve upper managers in line or support services: three credit managers, two management information service managers, two consumer product line managers, three sales or customer representative managers, and two grain-merchandising managers. Each supervised fifteen to twenty-five middle managers or other professionals. We questioned these people casually, seeking general information about the workplace and the roles communication played in it. We then asked them if they could identify the best writers/communicators in their group. They could, in every case.

Second, we spoke with eight reputedly good writers (as identified by our twelve managers) in twenty-minute conversational interviews, openly exploring their views of writing in the workplace and their own writing processes. Though the interviews were casual, we explored one core issue with all the writers: their sense of job security. We asked them to tell us whether and how their reporting/supervisory roles had changed in the last six months, whether they anticipated change in the immediate future, what caused the change, how they felt about it, as well as how they felt about their job security generally. Moving from workplace relationships to texts, we collected samples of the writers' recent work, asked them to identify at least two "interesting" pieces, and conducted short discourse-based interviews about these pieces (see Odell and Goswami 1982). By "interesting," we meant writing that requires conscious thought and planning, not "boilerplate." Our subjects typically regarded their interesting documents as "hard" writing that had consequences. We allowed our writers to identify sections of text especially "interesting" to them for the initial parts of the interview and concluded by asking them to explain their selection of one or two nominal structures.

Third, we conducted an additional set of interviews with several of the good writers' peers, using the same procedure. We also asked this group to identify the "good" writers in each of their units. These workers never contradicted the managers' evaluations of who were the "good" writers. Four of them suggested additional "good writers," but every one named the initial eight the upper managers had identified.

Hence, two clear groups of writers emerged from our analyses of writers supervised by our management informants in each workplace:

- The central peers—the respected 'good communicators' (who often turned out to be the best product managers or grain traders as well). These were the eight good communicators initially identified by management.
- The other guys—good-to-adequate workers, all comfortable with the idea that the central peers in their group were better with words—and maybe with other business skills as well. We studied twenty-six other guys.

For each of these thirty-four subjects, we read and analyzed at least four pages of their writing (a thousand words), typically more. We asked them for writing

| Table 1.1 Distribution of superfluous nominalizations in writing samples |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|----------|
| Subject group               | Average superfluous nominalizations per 1,000 words | Range    |
| Central peers               | 6               | 5–8      |
| Other guys                  | 12              | 10–18    |
samples produced within the last six weeks which they considered 'representative' and which demanded original planning and drafting—no 'boilerplate,' no texts organized by the table of data being summarized, and so forth. In this material, superfluous nominalizations surfaced in distinctive distributions.

Table 1.1 shows the range of average superfluous nominalizations for the central peers to be relatively narrow, ±3, with the feature distributed across different writers' samples more or less normally. The other guys vary far more, the averages ranging by ±8, with the most extreme cases displaying three times the average of the central peers. Even within these ranges, the most nominal writer in the central peer group does not quite reach the frequency of the least nominal other guy.

It is difficult to draw absolute conclusions from these data, primarily because we have no established norm for nominalization, superfluous or otherwise. Since any deep predicate can be realized in many surface forms, we cannot set a formal standard. And the relevant empirical norm does not exist. Few stylistic analyses of large corpuses have been broken down by genre, much less by workplace, register, or job family. Representative linguistic data bases like the Brown corpus have grouped texts by type, making only gross divisions by medium (e.g., daily vs. weekly newspapers) or by broad genre (e.g., editorial vs. reporting copy in newspapers; religion vs. skills and hobbies, genres defined by subject matter; see Kučera and Francis, 1967; and Francis and Kučera, 1982). Cultural linguistic analyses of the sort we are proposing are so new that the relevant baselines have not yet been set. We can, however, comment on a few trends, quickly observed:

- A recent issue of People magazine that we analyzed contained no superfluous nominalizations in a 2,000-word random sample from the text proper; two showed up in the copy of two computer advertisements (People, 28 May 1984).
- An article in the American Economic Review for December 1983 revealed fifteen superfluous nominalizations in every thousand words of text and far more 'legitimate' nominalizations (E.G. West and M. McKee, 'De gustibus est disputandum: the phenomenon of "merit wants revisited,"' pp. 1110–21).
- A recent issue of PMLA ([1984]; No. 3 [99]) showed superfluous nominalization at the rate of 0 to 12 incidences per every thousand words for three samples from three articles, reflecting a wide variety of styles within the genre of American literary criticism. (Though most academic composition texts recommend the verbal style, academic writers in professional publications respond variously to their own and their colleagues' advice.)

Applying these standards, we can say simply that our thirty-four subjects nominalize far more frequently than some groups and less frequently than others; our writers use superfluous, morphologically-marked nominal forms about nine times in every thousand words of text. Yet our samples drawn from strikingly different publications suggest that nominalization varies from language culture to language culture. We think its distribution is significant in our population of corporate writers.

As we said earlier, we believed the superfluous nominalization feature to be politically/psychologically motivated by the corporate environment. To test this assumption, we examined our writers' interview data more closely to determine if attitudes toward the work environment might distinguish another way to group our population and to re-examine the distribution of the nominalization feature. Writers' responses to questions about their positions in the workplace revealed two new groups: those secure in their jobs and those whose jobs were volatile or vulnerable. The volatile/vulnerable workers had changed or thought they might change their positions in the workplace. They had been promoted or demoted. Their reporting relationships had changed. They had a new manager. Their division or department had undergone reorganization, or else they expected it soon. Change—imminent or recent, real or imagined, dreaded or eagerly anticipated—made the difference.

In grouping our sample by this new variable, we found that central peers in secure jobs nominalize at about the same rate as their colleagues in volatile/vulnerable jobs; we found no significant or even suggestive differences. Not so for the other guys. Those in vulnerable positions fell at the top of the range for the group (see Table 1.2). The distinction between the 'secure other guys' and the 'volatile/vulnerable other guys' is statistically significant (p < .05).¹

Some other equally interesting observations about psychological/political motivators influencing nominalizations in corporate writing bear anecdotal reporting:

- Writing for the eyes of upper management or for powerful people outside of the corporation was more heavily nominal—consistently. Whether the powerful audience was addressed directly or 'copied' made no difference. When writing up the corporate hierarchy, nominalization goes up. When writing down, nominalization goes down.
- Our most insistent nominalizer was a black male manager reporting to a white female. His most nominal texts were those sent or copied to her. When writing to peers or subordinates, his tendency toward superfluous

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject group</th>
<th>Average superfluous nominalizations per 1,000 words</th>
<th>Range</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central peers</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Secure N = 3</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>5–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volatile N = 5</td>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>5–8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other guys</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure N = 8</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>10–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volatile N = 18</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>12–18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Some of the data were analyzed using chi-square tests, but they were not significant.
nominalization decreased. In an interview with one of us, his speech was formal and hypercorrect—at the start. Over the course of an hour’s conversation, he became comfortably informal and lucid, perhaps realizing that he was not meeting his old English teacher and that his ability as a market analyst and manager was recognized.

- Heavy nominalization characterized the writing of subjects from one of our two corporations, a firm in a state of continuous internal reorganization. (One of the managers we interviewed from this firm had worked in three different reporting relationships in the last fiscal year.) Writers in this organization may also have felt pressure to compete; divisions of the corporation were in open economic competition with each other for limited business, internally and externally.

1.3.2 Superfluous nominalization: an explanation

The frequency of superfluous nominalization correlates with the degree of anxiety or uncertainty. That is how one of us first expressed our major conclusion about nominalization in drafting this chapter—with two to five nominalizations (depending on whether you see 'anxiety', 'uncertainty', and 'frequency' as deep predicates occurring as predicate adjectives at an intermediate stage of the derivation). Our group's way of talking is powerfully compelling, affecting even our own way of writing. Our problem, of course, is to explain why. We have posited the motivations for such behavior: lesser professional stature (being one of the other guys) and job insecurity (experiencing considerable change in a job situation). We can suggest two other possible causes.

1.3.2.1 Dysfluency: stress and mediocre competence affect linguistic fluency

Speakers and writers under stress are less fluent. Stroke victims' linguistic error rate (qualitatively dependent upon the area of damage) rises when they are tired or upset. Second-language speakers' fluency drops under stress. Basic writers' use of a range of syntactic structures drops under examination pressure; in fact, students do better, in general, on take-home exams than under the pressure of time in class. All of this suggests an easy explanation for superfluous nominalization in corporate writing: the other guys, whose writing skills are less developed to begin with, lose what control they do have over their writing processes when they are under pressure. They are not central among their peers because they do not express themselves well, and vice versa. And maybe they are not as good at what they do in other areas either. Maybe skill with language corresponds to competence generally. This all has a certain appeal and probably some truth. And it fits well with the current and popular mythology of meritocracy. But we are not convinced that dysfluency caused by mediocre competence or stress entirely explains our writers' behavior.

1.3.2.2 Hypercorrection: superfluous nominalization is overrated as a prestige feature

Those intensely nominalizing other guys have grasped a valid sociolinguistic principle: nominalization, superfluous and otherwise, characterizes the language of their culture and also that of the academic social-scientific culture which educated many of its members. Nominalization is, in fact, a favored means for achieving semantic density, a sign of syntactic maturity, a formal trace of literate cognition, and a feature of published written and spoken language in academic cultures (see Hunt 1965; Daiker, Kerrek, and Morenberg 1978; and Danielewicz 1984). The other guys simply overvalue the feature; they use it more often and in more environments—linguistic and rhetorical—than the initiated central peers. In short, they hypercorrect their prose, producing forms which, while not ungrammatical, are either too frequent or inappropriate.

If hypercorrection were the only motivator, it should be a simple matter to explain the linguistic facts to weak writers and to tell them to back off a little. It is not that simple. The hypercorrection explanation ignores the power superfluous nominalization has as a cultural/psychological sign, even though it may accurately explain its distribution; the dysfluency explanation ignores this factor as well. We will elaborate our explanation of superfluous nominalization as 'sign' later, after we have considered the related discourse-level phenomenon, narrative text structure.

1.4 The narrative structures study

1.4.1 Method and results

We selected our informants from technically-oriented work environments isolated in a year's ethnographic research in fifteen companies. We assumed that writing bears the marks of its production, and its cultural traces are highlighted when it crosses from one language community to another. We were particularly interested in technical writing submitted to managers or to the editorial staffs—writing which moves from a highly specialized technical community to groups with other concerns, customer-relations professionals or corporate management, say. So we identified strategic positions in corporate structures at the intersections of 'critical paths' for communication.

In initial interviews with corporate vice-presidents, often those responsible for corporate communications, we studied organization charts and located strategic positions. We found these critical path intersections filled by editors in publications or communications departments or by senior managers in technical divisions. These editor/managers were our major informants. All were technically knowledgeable professionals in management positions; all had more than five years' experience. For their writing—and often for their technical work as well—young technical professionals reported directly to these experienced editor/managers who assigned the writing tasks, evaluated them on their writing performance, and exercised final quality control over the written product.

We interviewed these editor/managers in an informal way, guiding the conversation with prepared questions, but allowing them to talk on issues
...they thought critical. Whenever possible, we also interviewed one of the technical professionals they supervised, comparing their views. We taped all interviews and compiled notes from the tapes. We conducted follow-up interviews to clarify and elaborate interesting issues. We sent our interview notes to our informants for their comments and corrections. In a few cases, we sent our preliminary findings to especially astute informants and were gratified to find they agreed with our accounts.

Our interview data revealed that our informants were troubled about the tendency of writers in their groups to use narrative discourse structure when other discourse modes would have been more appropriate. The most articulate editor/manager we encountered—an executive vice-president in a technical consulting firm—described the problem this way:

[People with technical backgrounds] attempt to deal with the question by recapping a time sequence: 'The first level of analysis on this project involved gathering external data on organization, and considering demand ...'; 'Next we followed that ... and after that ...'. They take it in some kind of chronological recitation of what they did, as opposed to selecting from it those key things that will influence a decision-maker to accept their recommendation.

This informant would prefer to get 'key things that will influence decision makers.' The engineers gave him instead narrative logs of their engineering projects. His final comments about the problem is telling and synoptic:

We see a level of quasi-scientific neutrality with the apparent hope that the facts will speak for themselves. ... We are in the business of being consultants, ... of making recommendations. To leave that [the recommendations] to the interpretation of the reader, in our business, is a fatal error.

Pressed for more information, this manager confirmed that inappropriate narration was disproportionately frequent in his technically-trained peoples' writing. The head of the economics analysis division of a large public utility also attested to the ubiquity of narrative structure in his economists' writing and added, without prompting, that the problem was greater among his engineers. These editor/managers recognized their young professionals' frequent insecurity in their new roles. Pressure, cost overruns, delays, bugs in the software, and hassles from the customer pushed them into defensive postures, and the defensiveness manifested itself in overwriting—particularly in the form of narrative structures.

Our sense from all of the interviews was that the editor/managers and the young technical professionals they supervised had quite different interests. This case was particularly apparent in the observations of a software engineer:

My manager just wants the data that fits the deal she's trying to cut. I don't think that way. In [my last year's work], pieces of what she calls 'extra information' have turned out to be the start of new architectures. I just can't leave out stuff that way.

A simple observation: the editor/managers' product is often the DOCUMENT— the project report or proposal or software-with-documentation; the young professionals' product is typically the TECHNICAL PROCESS. The perceived function of the writing depends upon where one stands in the production cycle.

1.4.2 Narrative structures: an explanation

From speakers' or writers' choices of structures, we can infer their model of the audience and the relationship they construct with it (see Brown and Beach, forthcoming). To understand inappropriate narrative structures in corporate writing, we need to understand the corporate speakers' or writers' cultural roles. All language structure 'signifies' (see Barthes [1953] 1977). And all linguistic signs, in the language of psychodynamic psychologies, are multiply determined (see Wälder 1936). An author's choice to narrate when a reader (in this case his or her supervisor) advises differently is a good example of a sign so determined. Combining dysfluency and hypercorrection explanations with some common-sense cultural analysis, we offer three multiple determinants for the choice to narrate.

1.4.2.1 Narration is easy, automatic

The narrative is the first structure for extending texts that children acquire and the only one that many basic writers handle with ease. It probably has its source in visual memory: remember the sequence of events and verbalize them as you do it. Corporate writers favor it when they dictate or write under pressure: eidetic memory organizes the text.

1.4.2.2 Narratives preserve distance; they do not direct people's behavior

The narrative, like other speech acts, is distinguished by its effect on the discourse participants in a context (for examples of discourse distinctions, in pragmatic theory, see Searle 1975; Labov and Fanshel 1977; and Brown and Levinson 1978). The pragmatic thrust of narrative discourse reflects specific contextual motivators in the corporate environment and hence supports particular communicative roles. As our vice-presidential informant told us, managers are in the business of directing others' behavior. Making recommendations asserts their expertise, their ability to assume a directive role. Young technical professionals are in the business of careful technical analysis. Narrative structures assert their care and competence by recapitulating the technical process they conducted while allowing them to remain passive in transactions with customers and clients.

1.4.2.3 Narratives mirror the structure of the scientific method

Narratives relate a problem-posing and problem-solving process, a process of data gathering and integration from accounts of normal science in textbooks and from the modeling of these processes in lab courses. As such, they reflect a logical process for which technical professionals bear some unconscious allusion. As Foucault, Derrida, and some of the ego psychologists might put it, these persons' professional selves derive from and determine this discourse (see Erikson 1968; Foucault 1972; Derrida 1976; and Brooke 1984).
1.5 Toward Theory and Application

1.5.1 The major theoretical claims

As we have claimed and as our research confirms, no single explanation can account for language in social context; discourse bears multiple meanings, and its aspects are multiply determined. We suggest four variables which taken together account for why our writers act as they do in their workplaces. Though we detail these variables as relevant to our work, we believe they deserve attention in sociolinguistic analysis generally.

1.5.1.1 Writers often tend toward dysfluency

Speakers and writers often err—from carelessness, from ignorance, and from many other things. Though textbooks and pedagogy, both corporate and academic, often focus on writers' purported ignorance, the actual behavior of writers does not support dysfluency as the most likely cause of some behavior. Although all writers make mistakes (our subjects included), our observations suggest that what linguists may easily interpret as mistakes or ignorance can be very deliberate behavior. As the reader will recall, our subjects were not only told not to nominalize and not to narrate, but they had also taken writing seminars training them how to do otherwise. Nevertheless, they still persisted with these writing styles.

1.5.1.2 Linguistic structure and function influences writers' choices

The seemingly eccentric or irrational examples of language behavior we have observed exhibit logical grammatical choices—considering their syntactic, semantic, pragmatic, and phonological function. These forms are not ‘chosen’ at random.

Nominalization removes or obscures the case relations surrounding the deep predicate; for instance, agency and instrumentality vanish when the verbal form becomes a noun. In the case of superfluous nominalization, the dummy verb replaces the dangerous predicate with an innocent or positive action—rather than ‘recommending,’ the writer ends up simply ‘making’ or ‘offering’ a recommendation. It is interesting and not accidental that passive structures occur so frequently with nominalization; together they allow writers to remove themselves totally from their reported actions.

Narrative discourse represents the world of events, leaving the agent or doer of those events—often the writer—out of the picture. It gives—as one of our engineering managers put it—'just the facts, ma’am,' leaving the reader to act on the basis of those facts. It asks nothing, demands nothing. It implies neutrality on the writers' part and faith in the reader's ability to evaluate and decide.

1.5.1.3 Cultural initiation affects linguistic usage

It is one thing to note that weak corporate or technical writing contains too many nominalizations, and quite another thing to note that all writing in that culture is heavily nominal—by some cultures' standards—and that superfluous nominalization systematically relates to the way inmates behave in the culture to which they aspire.

The descriptive indices of sociolinguistic analysis, such as variability, style-shifting, and hypercorrection, usefully describe speakers' and writers' language behavior as they gradually become members of a new cultural group. Hypercorrections are not simple errors; they may be evidence that novices in the culture have overgeneralized the rules. Such sociolinguistic description supports ethnographic analysis of writing; it shows the formal relationships between an individual's language features and group practices. But it does not fully explain people's motivation for hypercorrecting.

1.5.1.4 The power of language as sign dominates

Sociolinguists typically assume that any linguistic choice is significant, communicating information about speakers and their attitudes toward hearers, topics, contexts, and so on. Our observations in the corporate environment confirm such an assumption. Our informants always responded to the effects of their words on their places in the organization—some acutely self-aware, others influenced by significations beyond their control.

Using superfluous nominalization and inappropriate narrative structure is only irrational behavior if we assume that writing should be economical and transparent. Often it should. But these features do more than influence the ways we process prose; they are signs as well. And it is their sign function that is sometimes in direct conflict with their communicative/transactional function.

Nominalization marks academic and corporate language. It is significant in absence and presence, allowing members of groups to use the form to mark and define themselves. The Anglo-American literary tradition disfavors nominalization—a significant absence. This stylistic signification informs the composition textbooks which it produced. But much European literary theory and most British and American social-science writing is heavily nominal—as is business writing. These stylistic tendencies mark writers in social-science and business 'groups.' As our informants told us and showed us, their need to communicate 'group' solidarity was often primary, especially when their roles in the organization seemed in jeopardy.

Narrative structure mirrors both the process/methodology and the discourses of science and technology. Its pragmatic function allows writers to take roles which match their sense of themselves and their favored functions in the corporate environment: task-centered, impartial, orderly, non-directive. To write scientific narratives is to recapitulate and reinforce one's sense of this social place.

In our view of things, ostensible core conventions of 'good writing' go the way of standard dialects in sociolinguistics: the conventions shift and change, to be replaced by other conventions, all dictated by contextual criteria. What is 'good' is what meets the complex needs of the language culture. This view troubles those of us who teach writing, of course. In the case of superfluous nominalization, it leaves us approving or at least accepting language which we may find hard to read. But it helps us—raising consciousness—to recognize
that we teachers privilege readability, transparency, and a myth of apolitical neutrality because we, too, are members of a language culture. When we recommend a way of writing, we reinforce our own group affiliations.

1.5.2 Ethnography and pedagogy

Asked what corporations should do about changing the writing behavior that we studied, we might answer: 'lower the level of insecurity in your organization.' What keeps this from being a mere flippant remark is its core of truth. Several of our organizations already recognized and responded to it with innovative management solutions to poor writing—quality circles for major writing projects, for example. The core insight for teachers is that all language has a cultural basis. If we do not recognize and accommodate it, our teaching fights the culture—and always loses. Ethnographic research reveals language/culture relationships, and it can thus inform our teaching objectives and methods. Four findings that are relevant to teaching practice emerge from our work.

1.5.2.1 Form/structure based teaching obscures the social basis of writing in particular language cultures

At best, purely formal-structural emphasizes miss the more interesting rhetorical dimensions of language choice. At worst, the formal structures that teachers didactically recommend and disregard not only mark their favored cultural affiliation but also imply an adversarial attitude toward the cultural affiliation of the student audience.

1.5.2.2 Errors do not always represent the writer’s ignorance

Errors may be evidence of a writer’s growth-in-progress—if they are hypercorrections of legitimate forms, for instance. These formal excesses signal speakers’ and writers’ growing control of their culture’s discourse. The ‘hypercorrection’ explanation also suggests how teachers should respond to these culturally significant features in students’ texts: clearly not with an attack. The aim should be not to eliminate the hypercorrect feature, but rather to help the writer manage it, to conform his or her practice to the norms of the culture.

The roots of hypercorrection are aspiration and uncertainty; the pedagogical solution may be mastery of the cultural discourse—and a sense of place in the organization, whether it be a classroom, a business office, or wherever. When writers feel competent about their skills and secure in their workplaces, their need to hypercorrect may vanish.

1.5.2.3 Writers need to learn to write for the audience who is observing the transaction

When we first heard writers in corporations discuss the consequences of the ‘copy list,’ we thought we had found something unusual. They were not reflecting the commonplace observation that professional writing has ‘multiple audiences.’ Instead, they were describing a ‘layered’ speech event in which the writer addresses an audience (or audiences), and the entire transaction is observed as a transaction by a known or imagined overlooking ‘other.’

In perceiving written discourse as an observed transaction, teachers’ sense of the structure of their own culture’s written speech events changes. They concede that every journal article, every textbook is observed, and that writers select language for the observers as well as for the audience to which they direct the text. As we ourselves are writing this somewhat self-reflexive text, we sense overlooking editors, publishers, and personnel committee members, as well as our audience of interested language scholars.

Our professional writing students—in corporations and in the academy—find great comfort and insight in recognizing and accepting that professional writing is often display behavior in a very public place. Once this is clear, it is easier to move on to issues of good written business practice or good technical reporting.

1.5.2.4 Writing instruction can motivate certain writing practices through linking them with group affiliation

Writing style marks groups. Desire for affiliation and support always motivates writers; it motivates those who respond to their writing as well. A young engineer offering as narrative report of a software-development project is presenting, in a sense, a life’s work—in both structure and content. A manager—or a technical writing teacher—who rejects the report on formal grounds is likely to make several other negative gestures toward the report writer unintentionally:

- reject the writer’s work and with it the writer’s source of professional competence and self-esteem;
- make the writer more insecure by communicating that his or her words—and the word they mirror—are not appropriate in the teacher/manager’s culture; and
- undercut his or her supervisory authority through polarizing the exchange: a language teacher’s or manager’s criteria are not engineering criteria; the writer thus has license to ignore it.

The training managers we met in our preliminary interviews reported employers’ sense that writing instruction was irrelevant to their jobs; they were reporting a bad cultural fit between teacher-language and professional writer-language. One cannot, for example, reject nominalization—superfluous or not. To do so is to reject a sign of group affiliation and thereby the group. In doing so, teachers are simply wrong; they have no culture-free basis for their preference, and they are recommending an unhappy linguistic/political course.

Nominalized writing does work on the job. Like it or not, much social-science and business writing gets along just fine with heavily nominal style. Teachers can, of course, tell students about the psycholinguistic and political consequences of stylistic choices, yet they must balance the preference for clarity with political grace (see Hake and Williams 1981; and Williams 1981).
1.6 **Epilogue**

We end with two strikingly different but significant texts—both treating the way language lets us build ourselves from roles available in society. The author of the first—so theoretically distanced and self-aware—talks about the reciprocal relationship of self and culture. The author of the second—eloquently naive—illuminates it:

We deal with a process 'located' in the core of the individual and yet also in the core of his communal culture, a process which establishes, in fact, the identity of those two identities. [Erikson 1968: 22]

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We're in with the in crowd; we go where the in crowd goes
We're in with the in crowd; we know what the in crowd knows
We've got our own way of talking, yeah
We've got our own way of talking
[Donnie Gray (1965), 'The In Crowd,' B. Page (lyricist), BMI, Elvis Presley Music, Hill and Range Songs]

Both common sense and theory recognize the tight bond of language, culture, and self. All that good ethnographic language analysis has to do is figure out—richly and clearly—what each 'in crowd' knows. Then we will know about their own ways of talking.

**Notes**

1. We wish to thank the Bush Foundation of St. Paul and the Graduate School of the University of Minnesota for support of our research. We are particularly grateful to the employees of fifteen Minnesota corporations, anonymous by request. They gave their time generously, and it is often their insights we report.

2. The observed statistic was $p = 0.028$ for the Mann–Whitney test.

**Bibliography**


2 Close cohesion with *do so*: a linguistic experiment in language function using a multi-example corpus

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2.1 An argument for analysis of actual language use

Not too long ago, investigations of oral and written language in use were all but abandoned by scholars of linguistics in the wake of Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* (1957). Chomsky (1957 and 1965) and others questioned the scholastic value of such analysis and started the search for intuitively derived 'kernel sentences' and 'deep structures' of language from which, they claimed, users generate actual use through a detailed set of 'transformations.' These researchers argued that the study of instances of actual use (or 'performance') is a trivial activity in view of the intellectual need for investigation into the innate ability (or 'competence') of native users of the language.

Today, Chomsky’s influence continues to be strongly felt; however, many linguists have returned to the study of actual language use on the premise that language can best be understood through such an analysis rather than by studying isolated made-up instances of language devoid of any context or communicative social function. Those who counter Chomsky's approach argue first that linguists can study only instances of linguistic performance (they cannot study or even determine what is in the brain), and second, that a systematic study of examples of language as it is used to communicate (and not just to prove a point of theory) is a well-established, scientifically defensible technique for describing language. This practical and largely empirical approach to language research is represented by work in language theory of the French and Prague school structuralists and is echoed today in the systemic linguistics of Michael Halliday and the tagmemic linguistics of Kenneth Pike.

Many linguists after Chomsky assert that language analysis should be within some theoretical framework, explicit or implicit, which governs the choice of research projects in working toward an integrated theory of language. In their view, a truly atheoretical approach would be little more valuable than presenting raw data, as it would fail to contribute to an overall explanation of an area of language. Any attempt to correlate sets of