

Incentivizing Better Writing: The Fatal Flaw Policy

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ABSTRACT

The importance of written communication skills for business undergraduates is well documented (Brink, Palmer, and Costigan, 2015, Brown 2015, National Association of Colleges and Employers 2015). In fact, communication skills are the most popular learning goal adopted by AACSB accredited programs (AACSB white paper, 2013). Despite the demand by employers for proficient writers and the acknowledgment of the importance of professional writing by business schools, a large and growing portion of undergraduates can't write (Sigmar and Hynes 2011).

Despite the importance of written communications skills, there remains limited evidence of effective methods to improve student writing. The majority of proposed methods demand increased amounts of writing and assessment of written communications skills using a rubric with limited impact. (e.g., Bacon and Anderson 2004). This research proposes a unique and effective method for improving undergraduate business students writing skills, the Fatal Flaw Policy. The Fatal Flaw Policy is shown next. Then, insights into the use of the policy are discussed.

Fatal Flaw Writing Policy: Writing clearly and concisely is critical for success in business, and your assignments must be free of grammar and spelling errors to communicate effectively. It is in your interest to allow sufficient time to complete assignments and proofread them carefully. Additionally, I recommend using The Writing Lab and Tutoring Center to improve your submissions; however, the Center cannot be expected to fix every error in the paper. The quality of the writing is the author's responsibility. Consequently, the following procedure will apply to all written assignments in this class.

Papers will be returned to individuals/teams when:

- More than three fatal flaws are identified on a page
- More than 10 fatal flaws are identified in a document

Fatal flaws in your writing include, but are not limited to, the following errors:

- Misspelled words
- Sentence fragments
- Run-on sentences
- Incorrect punctuation
- Mistakes in subject/verb agreement or verb tense
- Improper or inconsistent citations
- Incorrect word usage
- Awkward writing
- Lack of conformity with assignment format
- On second assignments, repeating comments from previous papers

Once the number of fatal flaws in a document exceeds the standards, I will stop grading and return the assignment. You have 48 hours to correct and return the paper. The final grade of the assignment will be reduced by 10%. If the resubmitted paper exceeds the maximum number of fatal flaws again, the maximum grade will be 65%.

The Fatal Flaw policy was applied to a written group report, that was submitted in three sections. On the initial submission, 9 of 15 papers were returned under the Fatal Flaw Policy. Of these only one was returned a second time. On the second submission, four projects were returned under the policy, and none were returned a second time. On the third submission, only 1 document was returned under the policy. The significant improvements, over three submissions, suggest that the Fatal Flaw Policy can be used to improve student writing.

Although, the Fatal Flaw Policy shows promise as a method for improving student writing it has several limitations. These include testing using a group assignment, differences in the requirements for sections, and a single reviewer policy. More importantly, the policy was applied only to gross grammatical errors and not to other writing and style issues, limiting its impact. Future use of the Fatal Flaw Policy can be used to assess how impactful it is to improve individual writing and extend the policy to assess writing style as well as grammar.

References:

Bacon, D. & Anderson E. S. (2004) Assessing and Enhancing the Basic Writing Skills of Marketing Students. *Business Communication Quarterly*. 67, p. 443 – 454.

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Sigmar, L. S. and Hynes G. E. (2011) Major Difference: An Examination of Student Writing Performance by Major and its Implications for Business Communication. *Administrative Issues Journal*. 2, 133 – 145.

Keywords: Written Communication, Writing Assessment, Business Education

Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners: The importance of written communication skills for business undergraduates is well documented. It is the most popular learning goal of AACSB accredited programs. However, undergraduates can't write. The Fatal Flaw Policy is an effective method for improving writing skills.

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