UNIVERSITEIT
AMSTERDAM

VU Research Portal

Assessing business proposals: genre conventions and audience response in document design

Lagerwerf, L.; Bossers, E.

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

**Assessing Business Proposals: Genre Conventions and Audience
Response in Document Design**
Luuk Lagerwerf and Ellis Bossers

The online version of this article can be found at:

http://job.sagepub.com/content/39/4/437

Additional services and information for *Journal of Business Communication* can be found at:

Email Alerts: http://job.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts

Subscriptions: http://job.sagepub.com/subscriptions

Reprints: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav

Permissions: http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

Citations: http://job.sagepub.com/content/39/4/437.refs.html

Assessing Business Proposals: Genre Conventions and Audience Response in Document Design

Luuk Lagerwerf
Free University Amsterdam, University of Twente

Ellis Bossers
IBM Nederland N.V.

We carried out two studies in which several genre conventions were tested on professional readers to verify the usefulness of applying genre conventions to business proposals. In the first study, 39 male business clients of the company IBM Netherlands compared an authentic business proposal with a modified version that conformed to genre conventions of document structure. Readers' preferences and reading behavior were noted and observed. In the second study, the same group of IBM business clients compared fragments of proposals that differed in stylistic genre conventions. Readers' preferences were noted and verified. Results of the first study indicated that applying genre conventions to document structure improved the readers' selection of information. Results of the second study revealed that readers disapproved of persuasive style shifts, while opinions differed with respect to shifts from impersonal to personal style.

P rofessional readers have certain expectations of the documents they read. These expectations are based on genre conventions. Such conventions evolve within a discourse community (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995). Some conventions are explicitly formulated, but other properties of the text are more implicitly conveyed by cultural norms of

Luuk Lagerwerf (Ph.D., University of Tilburg, Netherlands, 1996), is Assistant Professor in the Department of Public Administration and Communication Science at the Free University Amsterdam.

Ellis Bossers (MA, University of Twente, 2000), is project manager in the Marketing Communications Department at IBM Nederland N.V.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Luuk Lagerwerf, Free University Amsterdam, De Boelelaan 1081c, 1081 HV Amsterdam, Netherlands; e-mail l.lagerwerf@scw.vu.nl

a discourse community (Freed & Broadhead, 1987). Our aim in this two-part study is to verify some of the genre conventions that have been put forward in an effort to improve the quality of business proposals. Recommendations in business communication literature are based on such conventions, but have not always been specifically tested on professional readers. To overcome this limitation, the respondents in our research were professional readers with experience in reading business proposals. Especially in the case of business proposals, readers' judgments are relevant, for readers determine which proposal is going to be selected.

The structure of this article is as follows. First, the notions of genre convention and discourse community are discussed. Next, we develop specific research questions with respect to genre conventions of document structure and of style in a business context. Data from two studies are presented and discussed: The first study investigated reader responses on document structure, the second on stylistic choices.

Literature Review

We can distinguish between explicit and implicit genre conventions of business proposals. Explicit conventions are often set out in a client's request for proposal. Miller and Selzer (1985) observed that traffic transit plans for different cities reflected the way in which the legislation on the subject was organized. Moreover, the transit plans were developed as proposals, shaped by the guidelines of the request for proposal sent out by the city planning officer. Structuring a proposal by directly giving answers to the questions asked in the request for proposal might be considered a convention with regard to proposals. Meyers (1996) claimed, however, that following such a convention does not improve the quality of a business proposal. The same can be said of copying successful proposals: Adjustment of the copied document to a new context might be too parsimonious or inappropriate.

Difficulties with answering a request or with copying a successful proposal can be solved by specifying the structure of the document explicitly in sections like the summary, introduction and conclusion. In this way, the document will become less an answer to the request and can be read independently. Such structural pieces of advice are quite common in business communication literature and may be regarded as explicit genre conventions regarding document structure. Contrary to the convention of answering the request, these conventions are supposed to improve the structure of the document. In the section Document Structure below, we will develop the ways in which readers may profit from the application of these conventions, and the research questions of the first study will be formulated.

Implicit conventions of business proposals refer to the relation between writer and reader. These conventions evolve rather imperceptibly for writers and readers in discourse communities. In order to study the role of

implicit conventions, we have to understand how discourse communities may affect written communication. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) and Freed (1987) differ in their treatment of the notion of discourse community. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1995) investigated the process of writing and assessing abstracts for an academic conference. In their view, a discourse community consists of writers and readers sharing an academic discipline. Since the roles of abstract assessor and abstract writer may be exchanged, genre conventions of abstracts are developed by both writers and readers in a particular community. Another notion of discourse community was studied by Freed (1987). He described the case of a management consultant's company trying to acquire new clients by (among other things) effectively written proposals. In the definition of Freed (1987), a discourse community consists of writers—i.e., the management consultant's company, excluding the clients who will read the proposals. An important difference between these two communities is the quality of feedback writers receive. In a writers-only discourse community, writers tend to write impersonalized proposals: Because the writers of the document are too much involved with the product in the offer, the client is not visible in the proposal. A style characteristic of such documents is the lack of second and first person pronouns. In the section Style in a Business Context below, more reasons for (not) using personal style will be discussed.

Writing in a writers-only discourse community might also result in a lack of persuasion of the client. Focus is on a product, financials and services, but not on convincing the client. Freed, Freed and Romano (1995) revealed a discourse strategy to make proposals win the contest (the PIP-technique: persuasion-information-persuasion): Try to be persuasive in the beginning and the end of proposal sections, and informative in the body of the section. In the section Style in a Business Context below, research questions on the use of persuasive style in business proposals will be formulated.

Document Structure

In this section, the first two research questions will be developed. Conventions on the document structure of business reports demand that a report should contain a summary, introduction, conclusion, and introductions and conclusions in each section. Such conventions are not arbitrarily established: Business and technical reports are often comprehensive documents in which readers may wish to skip pages while maintaining an overview of the document. We are interested in actual reading behavior of the professional reader of comprehensive documents. Research on reader behavior has traditionally focused on short texts, instructive (e.g., Ummelen, 1996; Ummelen, 1997) as well as persuasive (e.g., Hoeken, 1995).

Neutelings (1997) is one of the few studies of reading behavior of professional readers handling comprehensive documents. Neutelings observed Dutch members of parliament. Members of parliament are sup-

posed to read many policy documents, assessment being their main objective. Within their limited time, they were able to read 23% of an average document. So, reading to assess within limited time implies selection of information. Neutelings' (1997) research revealed that members of parliament used considerable time for orienting reading activities, skimming, and scanning. They also used their prior knowledge, more than advance indicators in the text, to select fragments for intensive reading. As a result, readers were straying through the documents in their own individual and unpredictable way. This result agrees with observations of Hartley and Jonassen (1985) with regard to scholarly or technical reports, and with recommendations in textbooks for readers to read selectively (e.g., Waller, 1982).

Document structure may enable such non-linear readers to find relevant information easily. Besides, well-established structure may direct the readers' attention to text fragments containing information the writer considers to be important. Readers conventionally expect that advance indicators can be found in certain specific parts of the document, which makes it easier for them to find particular information. Swales (1990, p. 179) characterized the abstract of a research article as both expressing news value and indicating in advance the content and structure. He also found that the introduction of a research article typically has a Problem-Solution composition. These text properties are part of genre conventions that have evolved in an academic discourse community.

Business proposals need to conform to genre conventions of a business discourse community. Professional readers probably rely on some of those conventions to facilitate reading. Therefore, we may formulate research question (1): Do proposals structured along the lines of genre conventions enhance appreciation of business decision makers?

Appreciation of professional readers is important for business proposals. Equally important is knowledge of the way in which readers select information in a comprehensive document. According to Neutelings (1997), professional readers may use different selection strategies: very selective, selective, and intensive strategies. In a very selective strategy, readers use prior knowledge and advance indicators in the document to select information they are preoccupied with. They do not try to get the drift of the document, and stray unpredictably through the document. In the selective strategy, readers select more information, use more advance indicators, and try to get the drift of the document. While skipping information, the reader is going through the document in a more linear way. In the intensive strategy, a reader tries to capture all the information and the drift of the document, while going through the document in a linear way. Neutelings (1997) discovered that members of parliament use a very selective strategy. Readers of business proposals often have to decide between several offers presented. Their reading goal is not without engagement: A

choice for one proposal means rejection of others. Therefore, business decision makers possibly handle proposals with care, and they may choose a less selective strategy. So, we may formulate research question (2): How do business decision makers select information from comprehensive documents? In study 1, research questions 1 and 2 will be investigated.

Style in a Business Context

In this section, the third and fourth research question will be developed. According to Comprone (1993), genres are in a constant process of change, while textual properties of documents serve to answer the needs of the context and social situation in which a text is written (including the needs and wishes of the reader). He suggests that genres are best conceived as discourse strategies. In considering style changes in business proposals, we will try to reveal the effects of different strategies.

Using in house publications of several organizations, Cheney (1983) identified six different discourse strategies based on one general rhetorical technique: "The common ground technique" (Cheney, 1983, p.148). One of these strategies is "espousal of shared values," in which the personal pronouns *we* and *you* are used to create social identification between the employee and the organization. The concept of social identification by using rhetorical techniques is taken from the work of Kenneth Burke (e.g., Burke, 1950, pp. 19-46), who explains rhetoric as the art of persuasion, the latter achieved by social identification.

We want to define espousal of shared values more specifically. In the framework of speech style variation given in Bell (1984), speakers vary their style to a large extent according to (presumed) audience response. In case of written discourse, the audience is not physically present, but just as relevant for the author. Bell (1984) argues that writers vary their style according to their audience design. Bell's model predicts an effect of both persuasive and personal style in a business context. A shift from an informative and businesslike style to a more persuasive and personal style can be regarded as an initiative convergence: In an attempt to get a closer relationship with the reader, the writer changes style to change the communicative situation. An initiative convergence may lead to a positive referee response. Thus, a persuasive and personal style shift might have a positive effect on the readers' judgment. Considerations from advisory literature in business writing are that a personal style is more attractive than an impersonal style, even in business texts (cf. Bailey, 1999), and that writing in an impersonal style results from not considering the client (Freed, Freed, & Romano, 1995).

One may wonder why many business texts are still written in an informative, impersonal style, given the discourse strategies outlined above. There are several complementary reasons. As previously discussed, Freed (1987) explained that these style conventions have evolved in a writ-

ers-only discourse community, in which feedback does not stem from the intended readers. A second explanation can be found in the fact that the IBM business proposal is also a technical document: Like scientific documents, technical reports should be objective and impersonal. This convention persists in spite of the findings that students read a scientific text in active voice faster, comprehend its content better, and recall the name of the author more often than students who read the same text in passive voice (Ramsey, 1980).

More explanations for the use of an impersonal style can be given from a reader's perspective. A business decision maker's reading goal is to choose between competing proposals. This reading goal may increase involvement since the decision maker may have to argue for a particular choice. This might disturb the positive effects of a persuasive style since more involvement leads to a search for genuine information and real arguments, instead of a more superficial consideration of the text (Meyers-Levy & Malaviya, 1999; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Hoeken (1995) showed that people with a high need for cognition dislike brochure texts with evaluative but uninformative adjectives more than people who read texts with informative adjectives. Yet, people with a low need for cognition do not have any preferences. Need for cognition and high involvement both increase the attention for the text. Accordingly, decision makers might disapprove of too many evaluative adjectives.

A possible danger of a shift into a personal style is that a personal style may threaten the reader's face negatively (Brown & Levinson, 1987): Because the reader is a decision maker, he might not want to be addressed directly. If he accepts a direct, personal style, he might accept a closer relationship with the writer, and hence, make it more difficult for the reader to come to a negative decision.

From a perspective of discourse communities, social identification and style shifts, writers may improve proposals by addressing the reader directly and by trying to use persuasive tactics. From a perspective of advertisement processing and politeness, we note the dangers of these techniques. Research questions 3 and 4 will give clarity on the appropriateness of personal and persuasive styles: (3) Do business decision makers prefer a more direct, personal style in business proposals?; (4) Do business decision makers prefer a more persuasive style in business proposals? Research questions 3 and 4 will be answered in the second study.

Research Questions

The following research questions are answered in the present studies:
1. Do proposals structured along the lines of genre conventions enhance appreciation of business decision makers?
2. How do business decision makers select information from comprehensive documents?

3. Do business decision makers prefer a more direct personal style in business proposals?
4. Do business decision makers prefer a persuasive style in business proposals?

Because the research questions lead to different research methods, two studies are reported separately. The first study answers the first two research questions; the second answers the remaining questions. Both studies were conducted in one session with the same respondents. The research was called for by the Dutch chapter of a world wide company in information technology (IT): IBM Netherlands. Among other activities, IBM Netherlands provides hardware solutions for other companies. These solutions differ in magnitude, but vary between several thousands and millions of euros. The aim of the survey was to make an inventory of the clients' wishes with respect to the proposals they received.

Study 1:
Information Selection and Document Structure

Hypotheses
Business decision makers are supposed to select the best business proposal. Within a business setting, they will probably lack time to use the most intensive information selection strategy. Document structure might help them to select relevant information. Our first hypothesis is that professional readers appreciate documents structured along the lines of genre conventions more than an authentic IBM business proposal. Our second hypothesis is that professional readers who read a conventionally structured document capture more information than professional readers who read the same document with another structure.

Method
Participants. The participants worked for twenty companies in the Netherlands, all regular clients of IBM. Thirty-nine male respondents who had assessed business proposals before were selected (in the group of available IBM clients, no female respondents were found). Three groups were distinguished: 13 decision makers, 14 technical specialists, and 12 financial specialists. Elling, Andeweg, De Jong and Swankenhuisen (1994) suggested that decision makers and specialists differ in reading behavior. Profession of the respondent was therefore a possible explaining factor in reading behavior.

Material. Each respondent was asked to compare two different versions of a proposal, one of which was an original proposal from the Sales Productivity Centre (SPC) of IBM Netherlands (henceforth: the SPC version). The other version was the same in content, but adjusted along the lines

of genre conventions (henceforth: the CONV version). A description of the SPC and the CONV version will be given first.

In the SPC version, different kinds of information for a potential client were assembled: technical and financial details, as well as a business solution the client might prefer. The SPC version contained a proposal of 30 pages, together with 30 pages of appendices. Its structure was copied from another proposal. In fact, some sections were completely copied from the other proposal. The SPC version provided detailed information of the particular circumstances of the client organization and specified the conditions for the IT solution IBM was going to offer. The SPC version was composed like an advisory report with a global structure of problem analysis and solution.

Although readers as well as writers were all Dutch, the language used in the SPC version was English. As in most SPC proposals, English was used to support the international image and internal communication of IBM. Not every reader was satisfied with this language choice: 10% of 40 respondents made a remark on the choice of language (language choice was not a specific item in the survey).

In the SPC version, advance indicators were found in the table of contents and in the management summary. See Figure 1 for the table of contents of the SPC version.

As the table of contents reveals, there are no introduction, conclusion, discussion, or recommendations available in the SPC version. Advance indicators can be found only in the management summary (see, however, Figure 2). Conventionally (according to advisory literature, e.g. Jans, 1995; Keithley, Flatley & Schreiner, 1995; Steehouder et al., 1999), more sections should contain advance (or retrospect) organizers: foreword, summary, introduction, and conclusions. These sections contain elements like an inducement (foreword), description of the goal (introduction), or recommendations (conclusion). In the SPC version, the management summary included all of these elements. In Figure 2, the first page of the management summary of the SPC version is shown.

In the first sentence, the writers refer to the reason for writing the proposal. In the second sentence, reference is made to a previous meeting between the client Patronic (a pen name) and IBM. The relation between writer and reader is addressed, and the document is presented in the context in which it should be read. In the second paragraph and in the first sentence of the second section, the contextualization is continued by referring to previous meetings. There are no other contextualizing fragments in the management summary, and there are no references at all to properties of the structure of the document.

To make a CONV version that conformed to genre conventions we added an introduction, a conclusion, and introductions and conclusions to the sections of the SPC proposal. Furthermore, we changed the manage-

Figure 1.

Table of contents of the IBM Netherlands business proposal used in the survey.
Appendices are not included in this table of contents.

Figure 2.

First page of the management summary of the SPC proposal used in the survey.
Underlined utterances may be interpreted as indicators for readers.

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

IBM would like to thank Patronic for the invitation to respond to the Tal-project Request for Proposal. Patronic has indicated to prefer a Unix based solution. Choosing the IBM RS/6000 and AIX in combination with the Oracle RDBMS will enable Patronic not only to use the intellectual capital built up in the US in terms of managing an AIX/Oracle environment, but also capitalise on this knowledge in the future in other regions.

The RS/6000 product line has been discussed with the Tal-project team in two recent meetings. During these meetings several options have been discussed and how the RS/6000 would best fit the requirements of the Tal-project. In addition the meetings have enhanced the understanding of the implications of the project for both parties. In this proposal we have taken into account the fact that the RS/6000 is for a large part a new environment for Patronic.

System choice

The result of the meetings is the agreement on the proposal for 2 RS/6000 model S80's for the first phase of the project. The model S80 is the third generation of the RS/6000 S×0 line (4500+ installed), expanding scalability even further, the model S80 is the fastest Unix SMP server available today. The design principle of the model S80 has been targeted on central operations with a high level of reliability and availability. In that respect the S80 is unmatched in the Unix industry. To be able to argument a level of 99,5% availability we have added a fail-over component via the High Availability cluster software HACMP.

The initial strategy is to combine Transaction Repository, Data Mart and ETL tools on a single server. The AIX Workload Manager provides a flexible and easy to manage way to allocate system resource to any of these applications. The advantage of the single server implementation is the lack of complexity of for example the Oracle Parallel Server environment. Moreover the number of servers is reduced to the minimum.

An important feature of the model S80 is that can be integrated into an RS/6000 SP concept. Making the S80 the ideal entry point because it provides every option to grow with the project, without architectural limitations, which of course maximises customer investment protection.

---

ment summary by placing appropriate advance indicators and removing inappropriate ones. The management summary in the CONV version only presents theme and motivation, recommendations, arguments for these recommendations, and the consequences. Information that had become superfluous in this reformulated management summary was reallocated to the newly added introduction or conclusion of the CONV version, thus conforming to the conventions of document structure. The table of contents was adjusted to the changes.

Instruments. Three instruments were chosen to gather data on information selection and structure preference. The first instrument was to record the number and locations of jumps in SPC and CONV version when participants were going through one of the versions. Jumps were registered in the following way. Participants were observed to establish whether or not they were genuinely reading. Reading was defined as: The participant was not skimming, scanning or turning a page for more than five seconds. Each time subjects interrupted reading to go to another section, a jump was scored, together with its section of destination. In this way, we made visible the number of jumps between sections, as well as the number of visits to particular sections. The research protocol to count jumps was taken from Neutelings (1997). A second instrument was created by recording the choices of respondents between the SPC and CONV version and their preferences concerning the sections added to the CONV version. As a third instrument, the session was recorded and transcripts were made of the comments readers made while going through a version. This instrument was only used for exploratory purposes.

Procedure. The general procedure for each respondent was as follows: The interviewer visited the company of the respondent. She introduced herself as a researcher working on an assignment of IBM Netherlands. The session consisted of three parts. The respondent would first engage in the procedure for study 1 and then in the procedure for study 2. The session ended with an interview with particular questions about the IBM proposals. The duration of a session was approximately one hour.

In the first study, respondents were instructed to read two versions of a proposal, one after the other, in 10 minutes per proposal. They were randomly offered the manipulated CONV or the authentic SPC version to start with (in 61.5% of the cases, they started with the CONV version). They were informed that they were supposed to make a choice between the two versions afterwards. "It's not important whether or not you discover the differences, because they might not attract your attention. The goal is to gain some insight into the way people read proposals, so please read them as you normally would do." While the respondent was going through the proposal versions, the researcher recorded the section in which the respondent was looking, and the duration of his specific reading activities. After reading the two versions, respondents chose the ver-

sion of their preference, and indicated their preferences with regard to the additional sections in the CONV version.

A period of 10 minutes per proposal was far too short to read the proposal intensively. This period of time was chosen to make the reader skip parts of the proposal. The task of comparing between proposals resembled the common reading goal of the proposal readers, although the grounds on which they compared the proposals were different.

Results

Our first hypothesis was that professional readers appreciate documents structured along the lines of genre conventions (i.e., the CONV version) more than an authentic IBM business proposal (i.e., the SPC version). Preferences of readers indicated that readers appreciated the CONV version more than the SPC version: 41.7% of the respondents preferred the CONV version, and 25 % the SPC version. However, 33.3 % did not have a preference for either version. These three groups did not differ significantly. So, in the group of respondents as a whole, there was no unequivocal preference for the CONV version. However, there was a sequence effect: an interaction between the sequence in which the respondents read the versions and their preference for a version (chi^2 = 4.822, d.f. = 1, p < .05). Respondents who read the SPC version first preferred the CONV version, whereas the respondents who read the CONV version first did not have a particular preference.

The majority of respondents (63.2%) preferred introductions to proposals, whereas 26.3% did not prefer them (chi^2 = 16.632, d.f. = 2, p < .001). Preferences for an introduction in each section were equally distributed: 56.8% preferred an introduction per section, 43.2% did not. Conclusions per section, however, were preferred by 64.9% versus 32.4% (chi^2 = 21.459, df = 2, p< .001). There was an equal distribution of the preferences for conclusions and recommendations at the end of the CONV version: 55.6% preferred them but 41.7% did not.

Our second hypothesis was that readers of the CONV version would capture more information than readers of the SPC version. Most readers started their selection paths with the management summary. Looking at the separate test proposals, 89.5% started at this point in the SPC proposal. The CONV proposal had 76.9% of all readers starting with the management summary.

Reading paths of readers are presented in Figure 3. Because the proposals differ in structure, a comparison of the differences is difficult. However, two effects in the patterns of Figure 3 are clearly present. Both versions are read in a linear way, from the beginning to the end. In the SPC versions, fewer readers reached the end of the proposal. In reading from the beginning to the end, irrelevant information was skipped within the sections.

Figure 3.

Enumerated jumps of reading respondents from one section to another in the CONV version (left) and the SPC version (right). Boxes represent sections; their size represents the number of times a jump landed in a section. The arrows represent enumerated jumps: dotted arrow > 2 jumps; line arrow > 7 jumps; block arrow > 14 jumps; bold block arrow > 21 jumps.
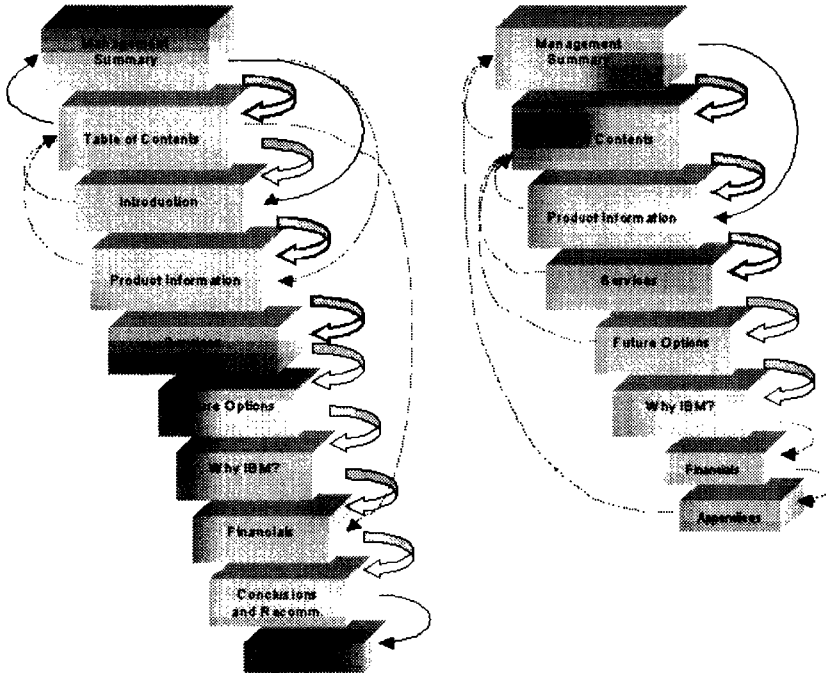
From the transcriptions of the comments respondents made while reading, it appeared that the main concern was to learn about the offer itself and about the price. Several respondents made comments, such as: *"Yes, the only thing that I usually read is the management summary, and the price. That is what I consider to be important"* (translated from Dutch). Such comments suggest that what the readers want to achieve is to arrive at the financial sections after they study the section(s) in which the offer is revealed. Thus, the number of readers that reach the financial sections within the time limit is a measure for the amount of (relevant) information readers have captured. With respect to Figure 3, we already observed that more readers get to the financials in the CONV version than in the SPC version. The difference between versions is significant ($\chi^2=9.058$; df = 1; $p < .01$). Accordingly, the second hypothesis is confirmed.

Discussion

In the first study we wanted to answer two questions. First, do proposals structured along the lines of genre conventions enhance appreciation of business decision makers? Second, how do business decision makers select information from comprehensive documents? With respect to the first research question, we found a sequence effect that needs to be explained before the first hypothesis may be confirmed. The sequence effect showed that respondents who read the SPC version first preferred the CONV version, whereas no specific preferences were found in the other sequence. This may be explained by the assumption that people build up a mental representation from the text they read (Van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Lagerwerf, 1998, see also their references). When they read the CONV version first, the presence of indicators of document structure make it possible to build up a mental representation of the text as a whole. Such a mental representation facilitates reading the SPC version after the CONV version. Such an effect does not take place in the reverse sequence: When respondents read the SPC version first, the mental representation of the text as a whole may not have the quality of the mental representation readers build up from the CONV version. After reading the SPC version as the first one, readers are still in need of a facilitating mental representation. They will experience the advantages of the document structure of the CONV version. In spite of the fact that the explicit judgments were not unequivocal, the sequence effect shows that readers judge implicitly in favor of the CONV version. This confirms the first hypothesis. Thus, proposals structured along the lines of genre conventions do enhance appreciation of business decision makers.

More information about the kind of conventional structure that enhances appreciation is provided by the preferences of readers for the specific additional sections of the CONV version. These preferences seemed to be contradictory. Readers were divided in their preference for conclusion and recommendations, but they preferred the introduction. A speculative explanation could be that there is suspicion about the neutrality of the conclusion: Given the source, their recommendations will be positive on accepting the offer. However, the preferences for the section introductions and section conclusions seem to indicate the opposite: Readers were divided in their preferences for section introductions, but they preferred section conclusions. Apparently, readers did not have any suspicions about the neutrality of the section conclusions but interpreted them as short summaries of the section content. The section introductions might be experienced as meaningless indicators of a predictable section structure.

Professional readers who read a conventionally structured document capture more information than professional readers who read the same document with another structure (hypothesis 2). Fewer readers of the SPC version reached the financial sections, compared to the CONV ver-

sion readers. Moreover, Figure 3 shows that readers of the CONV version tended to read even the conclusion and recommendations, although both sections are positioned after the financial sections. The information formulated in the conclusion aims at a positive decision. Thus, not only did readers capture more relevant information, they also ended their reading more often with positive information about the offer. The fact that the CONV version was slightly longer than the SPC version, due to the extra sections it contained, underlines the positive effect of applying genre conventions to document structure.

Business decision makers use a selective strategy. Apparently, they skip information while going through the document in a linear way. This is not the way Neutelings (1997) described the information selection strategy of members of parliament in which a highly selective strategy was employed. Such strategy differences might result from a difference in degree of involvement: Because the reading goal of decision makers involves choosing one of several proposals they are careful at drawing conclusions. There are consequences as well: The proposals offer IT equipment to the extent of thousands or millions of euros, so making the wrong choice will cost the client considerable money. Neutelings (1997) stated that members of parliament only have to adjust existing opinions on the basis of a report, without further consequences. So, the difference in reading goal may account for the difference in information selection strategy.

Study 2: Style Shifts and Audience Response

Hypotheses

Style variation in specific sections of business proposals will be investigated in the second study. Two variations will be studied: a personal style and a persuasive style. Our first hypothesis is that in specific parts of the proposal, a personal style will be appreciated more than an informative style. Our second hypothesis is that in specific parts of the proposal, a persuasive style will be appreciated more than an informative style.

Method

Participants. A description of the selection of participants is provided in Study 1.

Material. Participants compared different versions of a management summary, an introduction of a proposal, and a section conclusion. These proposal parts were derived from the CONV version used in study 1. For each of these proposal parts, three versions were created and gathered into small documents that looked like genuine proposals. The different versions were created by changing the informative version (exemplified in Fragment 1) into a persuasive version (Fragment 2) and a personal version (Fragment 3).

Fragment 1 (informative): IBM is a worldwide company and is in the business for several decades. The company produces a large range of IT-products, offering solutions for all kinds of IT problems. Choosing from the possible servers, operating systems and software, the following solution is proposed; a model S80 server from the RS/6000 product line with AIX software running in a UNIX environment.

Fragment 2 (persuasive): IBM is a successful worldwide company and has several decades of experience. The company produces a large range of IT-products, offering solutions for all kinds of IT problems. Choosing from the possible servers, operating systems and software, the following solution is recommended; a model S80 server from the RS/6000 product line with AIX software running in a UNIX environment. It can be upgraded several times without any problem and needs little maintenance and service.

Fragment 3 (personal): IBM is a worldwide company and is in the business for several decades. We produce a large range of IT-products, offering solutions for all kinds of IT problems. Choosing from the possible servers, operating systems and software, we propose the following solution; a model S80 server from our RS/6000 product line with AIX software running in a UNIX environment.

Fragment 1, taken from the CONV version in study 1, contained a style very common for SPC proposals. This style was quite impersonal and not very persuasive. Fragment 2 was derived from fragment 1 by adding evaluative adjectives. Some non-technical selling arguments were added as well. With respect to Fragment 2, the adjective *successful,* the NP-complement *of experience,* and an extra sentence with non-technical additional arguments were added, while the verb *proposed* was replaced by *recommended.* Fragment 3 was derived from Fragment 1 by changing passive voice into active voice with personal pronouns like *we* and *our.* Other means, not present in Fragment 3, were the use of *you* and *your,* and third person self-reference of IBM, as well as reference to the clients' company name: *IBM's solution for Patronic is a server for large IT-infrastructures: an RS/6000.*

The differences between styles were not implemented in an absolute sense. To obtain a more personal style, one could systematically use *our* instead of *IBM's* and *you* instead of *Patronic.* However, this would diverge too much from a business report style. Third-person self-reference to companies, changing companies into acting individuals, conforms to a business style and is still more personal than using passive form and nominalizations.

We did not add persuasive elements to the personal style, nor did we add personal elements to the persuasive style. The style versions were included in small proposals, so the context in which the versions were presented was common to the readers, and suggested the genre of a business proposal.

Instruments. Two instruments were used to measure readers' preferences. The first instrument was a split-run session: Readers were asked to state their preference for one of two presented versions. They had to choose between an informative proposal part and a persuasive one and between an informative and a personal one. Every choice was registered. The second instrument also consisted of registering preferences of readers with respect to a specific style. In this instance readers were asked whether or not they preferred a personal, persuasive or informative style with respect to the proposal parts they had judged. This second instrument was used to verify whether or not their choice in the split-run session was indeed based on style differences.

Procedure. The procedure of study 1 took place directly before the procedure of study 2. When respondents had completed the tasks for study 1 they received two style versions simultaneously. The management summary was tested first, starting with the persuasive and the informative style. Respondents were instructed to read both versions and then to indicate their preferences. Respondents were informed that the texts contained basically the same information, but were written in a different style. After respondents had made their choice, the persuasive version was replaced with the personal version. Respondents were again asked to compare the two versions. Respondents were then asked to repeat the procedure for the introduction of the proposal and the conclusion of a section. Respondents were asked one question after each choice: "How do you think a management summary / introduction / conclusion of a section should be written? In a convincing / personal style, or in an objective and informative way?"

Results

The first hypothesis was that in specific parts of the proposal a personal style is appreciated more than an informative style. The second hypothesis was that in specific parts of the proposal a persuasive style is appreciated more than an informative style. The results for the style preferences are given in Tables 1 and 2. In Table 1, the comparison between informative and personal style is represented. Comparisons between informative and persuasive style are presented in Table 2. The informative versions were identical in both comparisons.

The data in Table 1 show that preferences were equally divided. With respect to the small conclusion of a section it would seem that fewer readers preferred a personal style. There was no proposal part where readers differed significantly in their preferences between a personal or informative style version. Thus, the first hypothesis is rejected.

The results presented in Table 2 suggest that for every proposal part the informative style was preferred, instead of the persuasive style. This tendency appeared to be stronger in the conclusion of a section, where

Table 1.
Style preferences (in percentages) in management summary,
introduction of the proposal, and conclusion of a section (N = 35),
and a measure of the differences (χ^2 test, n.s. = not significant)

	Informative	Personal	No Preference	χ^2
Summary	42.1%	42.1%	15.8%	n.s.
Introduction	40.0%	48.6%	11.4%	n.s.
Conclusion	44.1%	32.4%	23.5%	n.s.

more readers appeared to be decisive in disliking the persuasive style version. Their preference was indeed based on the recognition of a persuasive style: The agreement between a preference as indicated in Table 2 and the respondent's answer to the question which style they preferred in a particular proposal was calculated for respondents who indicated a preference in both cases. For the management summary, 86.4% agreed in preference (N=26). For the introduction, this was 72.0% (N=25); for the conclusion of a section, this was 62.1% (N=29). So, the second hypothesis is rejected. Instead, a hypothesis in the opposite direction may be formulated: In specific parts of the proposal, an informative style is appreciated more than a persuasive style.

Discussion

In this second study, two research questions are answered. First, do business decision makers prefer a more direct personal style in business proposals? Second, do business decision makers prefer a persuasive style in business proposals? Both questions are negatively answered: Readers do not unequivocally prefer a personal style, and they even specifically dislike a persuasive style.

The choice between a personal and informative style seems to be individually determined. Professional readers do not have shared opinions about a personal style. A personal style, with the use of second person pronouns, is one of the most straightforward forms of initiative convergence (Bell, 1984). As referees, the respondents either liked or disliked the convergence. It is possible that the group that disliked the personal style experienced the direct address as impolite because it might be felt as an attempt to influence the decision. On the other hand, not everyone rejected the personal style.

With respect to the fourth research question, it appeared that the respondents did agree on persuasive style: They recognized and disliked it. The chosen manipulation, that had evaluative adjectives and arguments, did not give a convergence effect. In fact, a divergence effect was measured. A business decision maker might feel disturbed by a persuasive style, as it distracts him from his goal of trying to come to a well-founded

Table 2.
Style preferences (in percentages) in management summary,
introduction of the proposal, and conclusion of a section (N = 35),
and a measure of the differences (χ^2 test).

	Informative	Persuasive	No Preference	χ^2; df; p
Summary	60.5%	18.4%	21.1%	12.684; 2; < .01
Introduction	62.9%	22.9%	14.3%	14.114; 2; < .01
Conclusion	58.8%	38.2%	2.9%	16.294; 2; < .001

decision. Responses to one of the interview questions showed that respondents did not think that their decisions were influenced by the way the report was written (little influence 69.2%; some influence 25.6%; a lot of influence 5.1%; N = 39). Apparently, readers in this study did not like to be influenced by the report and wanted to make factual comparisons.

Some respondents indicated that there was a negative effect of badly written proposals. These findings comport with the idea that disturbances from the reading goal have a negative effect. We might assume that a persuasive style in a business proposal is regarded as a disturbance of the reading goal.

Conclusion

To summarize, this study addressed four research questions in two studies:

Study 1
   1. Do proposals structured along the lines of genre conventions enhance appreciation of business decision makers?
   2. How do business decision makers select information from comprehensive documents?

Study 2
   3. Do business decision makers prefer a more direct personal style in business proposals?
   4. Do business decision makers prefer a persuasive style in business proposals?

With respect to the first question, study 1 revealed that respondents appreciated a conventionally structured version of a business proposal more than an original IBM version. The second question was answered by the analysis of the reading paths of the respondents: Readers appeared to go through a document in a more linear way than expected, starting more often at the beginning of a document. This preference indicates that business decision makers may make use of a selective information selection strategy, rather than a very selective process. Fewer readers reached the financial sec-

tions in the original version, compared to the conventionally structured version. This finding suggests that the conventionally structured version helps readers to capture more information. Writing proposals by copying the structure from earlier proposals does not work out the right way. Applying genre conventions concerning document structure does indeed have the intended effects: more appreciation and more transfer of information. Below, a third effect will be discussed with respect to persuasion.

Study 1 employed a unique method to observe information selection by counting the jumps readers made in the experimental documents. In this way two versions of the same document could be compared. Although reliability is dependent on the observer, we believe the method is valid since the reading path represents what is observed; that is, information selection. The use of the term information selection only implies that readers could have had access to information, not that they actually did process information. It is worthwhile to extend and improve this method in such a way, that the results can be interpreted quantitatively as well.

The answer to the third question posed in the second study is that readers have individual preferences with respect to personal style. Some preferred and others disapproved of a personal style. The answer to the fourth question was contrary to what was expected: Professional readers do not accept a persuasive style in business proposals. Apparently, the informative (impersonal, non-persuasive) style is the common convention in business texts, and it seems to be the readers' choice to conform to those conventions. Advisory literature prescribing a personal style (Bailey, 1999) or a persuasive style (Freed et al., 1995) try to change the accepted norms rather than to convey them.

As for personal style, the presumed relation between reader and writer is an important factor. It might be possible that some respondents feel more united with IBM Netherlands than others. If a reader feels included in the discourse community of IBM and their clients, a personal style might be accepted; however, if the reader wants to be excluded from the discourse community, a personal style might not be accepted. This comports well with the concept of social identification, which implies division as well (Burke, 1950). The possibility of accepting a personal style seems to be dependent on the degree of inclusion of the client within the community. This raises the question of how to decide when a reader feels included. One obvious factor is time: A reader is more likely to feel included if the relation between IBM and the client lasts longer. In any case, using impersonal style is not merely a matter of behaving aloofly within a narrow discourse community, but much more a signal of a distant relationship with the client. One of the goals of IBM's survey among the respondents (not reported for reasons of confidentiality) was to acquire information about the individual preferences of its clients in order to apply that information individually.

The use of a persuasive style was consistent with the PIP technique (Freed et al., 1995) since only introductory or conclusive sections were used to employ the style manipulations in the second study. The outcome of this study suggests that the PIP technique might backfire, rather than working successfully. There is, of course, the possibility that the situation in which the respondents in this study had to make judgments was different from reality (the study would then not be ecologically valid). We think, however, that there was enough resemblance between the real-life situation and this study, since the business decision makers had to make choices. Their reading goal was the same, although the grounds on which they had to make decisions was different (financial or stylistic considerations). The fact that their judgments of versions agreed with their preferences in words makes it unlikely that the PIP technique works while it is not recognized. Readers do have metatextual judgments in this case.

Generally, it seems that both studies into business proposals reading have shown that professional readers tend to appreciate the application of genre conventions concerning the structure of a business report, but disapprove of the application of any stylistic device that results in a less neutral text. With respect to a neutral formulation, we speculated in the first study that the presence of a conclusion and recommendations would arouse suspicion about the neutrality of the proposal, whereas section conclusions were considered to be neutral summaries rather than persuasive conclusions. However, the results of the second study showed that readers suspect section conclusions just as well. Table 1 shows that more readers tend to dislike a personal style in a section conclusion; Table 2 shows that more people dislike a persuasive style in a section conclusion. Apparently, it would appear that professional readers are aware of sections in a proposal in which they might be influenced, and they do not like persuasion in those sections.

Generalizing over both studies, a remark should be made on persuasive writing. In the second study, a persuasive style was taken to be the operationalization of persuasive writing. Such an operationalization does not do justice to other ways of persuasive writing that might work without arousing suspicion. In study 1, readers of the CONV version did not only reach the financial sections, but also the subsequent conclusion and recommendations. Even if the style of the sections were informative, the order of the two chapters may be considered as a persuasive tool. The reader may have been influenced by the positive recommendations in the end.

The two studies presented in this investigation represent two contrasting results for business communication literature: Recommendations on structure did have positive effects, while recommendations on style did not. There are two complementary explanations possible for this contrast. First, genre conventions need to be accepted before they have effect. Apparently, for the genre of business proposals the conventions on struc-

ture are accepted, while the genre conventions on style are not. The second explanation is to interpret the results with regard to the reading goal: The reader wants to be facilitated in his reading goal (hence the acceptation of structural devices), while he does not want to be disturbed in reaching his reading goal (hence the rejection of stylistic devices). The fact that the results did not vary among the three different professional groups suggests strongly that goal attainment is the critical factor.

Lentz and Pander Maat (1992) claim that respondents without meta-textual education do not provide reliable judgments. Many respondents in study 2 said not to have been influenced by the way in which a proposal was written. This may account for the fact that many respondents did not indicate preferences. Indeed, readers who omitted preferences may have been incapable of making metatextual judgments (cf. Lentz & Pander Maat, 1992) Yet, it is possible that readers might not have preferences when they believe they are not influenced by different styles of writing.

As with all experimental research, the present study included limitations, in particular, the restricted availability of experienced business readers. The group of respondents was relatively small. Yet, the readers were taken seriously as experienced professional readers (which was not in line with the recommendations of Lentz & Pander Maat, 1992). Indeed, the sequence effect of the order in which the versions were presented indicates that not all professional readers have metatextual awareness. On the other hand, it is important to obtain judgments from professional readers because they decide for themselves what to do with business texts.

References

Bailey, E. P. (1999). *Writing and speaking at work.* Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Bell, A. (1984). Language style as audience design. *Language in Society, 13,* 145-204.

Berkenkotter, C., & Huckin, T. N. (1995). *Genre knowledge in disciplinary communication.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Brown, P., & Levinson, S. (1987). *Politeness. Some universals in language.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Burke, K. (1950). *A Rhetoric of Motives.* New York: Prentice-Hall.

Cheney, G. (1983). The rhetoric of identification and the study of organizational communication. *Quarterly Journal of Speech, 69,* 143-158.

Comprone, J. J. (1993). Generic constraints and expressive motives: Rhetorical perspectives on textual dialogues. In N. R. Blyler & C. Thralls (Eds.), *Professional communication: The social perspective* (pp. 92-108). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Dijk, T. A. van, & Kintsch, W. (1983). *Strategies of discourse comprehension.* Orlando, Florida: Academic Press.

Elling, R., Andeweg, B., Jong, J. de, & Swankenhuisen, C. (1994). *Rapportagetechniek [Reporting techniques].* Groningen, Netherlands: Wolters-Noordhoff.

Freed, R. C., & Broadhead, G. J. (1987). Discourse communities, sacred texts, and institutional norms. *College Composition and Communication, 38*(2), 154-164.

Freed, R. C., Freed, S., & Romano, J. (1995). *Writing winning business proposals: Your guide to landing the client, making the sale, persuading the boss.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Hartley, J., & Jonassen, D. H. (1985). The role of headings in printed and electronic text. In D. H. Jonassen (Ed.), *The technology of text. Principles for structuring, designing and displaying text* (Vol. 2, pp. 237-263). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.

Hoeken, H. (1995). *The design of persuasive texts: Effects of content, structure, and style on attitude formation.* Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Tilburg University, Tilburg, Netherlands.

Jans, R. (1995). *Een goed rapport: schrijven van beleidsnota's, evaluatierapporten, verklarende en beschrijvende nota's en instructierapporten [A good report: Writing policy documents, evaluation reports, explanatory and descriptive papers, and instructional reports].* Baarn, Netherlands: Nelissen.

Keithley, E. M., Flatley, M. E., & Schreiner, P. J. (1995). *Manual of style for business letters, memo's and reports.* Cincinnati, Ohio: South-Western Publishing Co.

Lagerwerf, L. (1998). *Causal connectives have presuppositions. Effects on discourse structure and coherence.* Den Haag, Netherlands: HAG (available in *LOT Dissertation Series, 10,* wwwlot.let.uu.nl).

Lentz, L. R., & Pander Maat, H. L. W. (1992). Evaluating text quality: Reader-focused or text-focused? In H. L. W. Pander Maat & M. F. Steehouder (Eds.), *Studies of functional text quality* (pp. 101-114). Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Meyers, D. (1996). (Book review of) Richard C. Freed et al. (1995), Writing winning business proposals: Your guide to landing the client, making the sale, persuading the boss. *Technical Communication, 43*(3), 302-303.

Meyers-Levy, J., & Malaviya, P. (1999). Consumer's processing of persuasive advertisements: An integrative framework of persuasion theories. *Journal of Marketing, 63,* 45-60.

Miller, C. R., & Selzer, J. (1985). Special topics of argument in engineering reports. In L. Odell & D. Goswami (Eds.), *Writing in nonacademic settings* (pp. 309-341). New York: Guilford Press.

Neutelings, R. (1997). *De eigenzinnige lezer. Hoe Tweede-Kamerleden en gemeenteraadsleden beleidsteksten beoordelen. [The willful reader. How Representatives and councilmen judge policy documents].* Den Haag, Netherlands: Sdu uitgevers.

Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change.* New York: Springer.

Ramsey, R. D. (1980). Grammatical voice and person in technical writing: Results of a survey. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 10*(2), 109-113.

Steehouder, M., Jansen, C., Maat, K., Staak, J. van der, Vet, D. de, Witteveen, M., & Woudstra, E. (1999). *Leren communiceren. Handboek voor mondelinge en schriftelijke communicatie [Learning to communicate. Handbook for oral and written communication].* (4th ed.). Groningen, Netherlands: Wolters-Noordhoff.

Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings.* Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Ummelen, M. M. N. (1996). The selection and use of procedural and declarative information in software manuals. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication, 26*(4), 475-488.

Ummelen, M. M. N. (1997). *Procedural and declarative information in software manuals: Effects on information use, task performance and knowledge.* Amsterdam: Rodopi.

Waller, R. (1982). Text as a diagram: Using typography to improve access and understanding. In D. H. Jonassen (Ed.), *The technology of text: Principles for structuring, designing, and displaying text* (Vol. 1, pp. 142-153). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications.