ABSTRACT
          For an analysis of real-world writing, a researcher picked
annual reports since they are written for stockholders, financial advisers,
and "the competition." Annual reports are essentially "puff pieces,"
documents written by company people aiming to please the stockholders.
Because of the varied audience, the narrative section, the largest and most
important prose section of these documents, was chosen for analysis. Thirty
reports were examined--10 picked by financial magazines as "best of the
year," 10 picked as "worst of the year," and 10 chosen at random from the
Fortune 500 list. An analytic method came from an examination of other
reports which allowed pinpointing 32 characteristics important to
understanding what these documents were made of--22 syntactic and stylistic
features, and 10 rhetorical features. After the documents were scanned and
put into a readable format, the "Correct Grammar" computer program was used
to provide figures on the total number of words, average sentence and
paragraph length, possible passive voice, and syllables per hundred words.
All 30 narratives were read for the rhetorical analysis. Testing the data
using a modified t-test, significant differences were found in the variables
between the successful and average groups in only two places; data analysis
suggests that 68.1% of the time the groups do not vary. Figures gathered in
this study could be used to characterize those rhetorical and syntactic
characteristics to business writing students, and in turn, these students
could use the figures to examine their own writing to determine its
"fingerprint." (NKA)

A Syntactical and Rhetorical Analysis

of Selected Annual Reports

Marshall Myers

Eastern Kentucky University

Although hardly a mechanic, I have always been fascinated by the way things are put together. Building soap-box cars, changing spark plugs in my car, putting together toys on Christmas Eve were things I enjoyed, if they weren't too complicated.

It should not be surprising, then, that I would be fascinated by real-world writing and the way it is put together, for it was to me a blend of my fascination with both how things work and how language works, another continuing interest of mine.

For my analysis, I picked annual reports since they were written for stockholders, a general audience of lay persons, although, certainly, more specialized readers included security analysts and other financial advisers, and, of course, the competition.

Annual reports are interesting, real-world documents since they are essentially "puff pieces," documents usually written by company people aiming to please, and read by eager stockholders anxious to find how their money is being spent, what new products or services the company has added, and, of course, what the bottom line is.

Because of the varied audience, the narrative section, the

largest, and, in some ways, the most important prose section
of these documents, was the section I chose to analyze.

Of course, I had to have some criteria for selecting these
documents in order to be able to generalize about their syntactic
and rhetorical "nature." When I found out that several financial
mass circulation magazines have "best of the year" and "worst
of the year" contests, I struck upon the strategy that I would
select ten reports from the "best of the year," ten from the
"worst of the year," and ten from not on either list, but chosen
at random from the Fortune 500 list. That gave me thirty reports
to examine, a good enough sampling to generalize about the style
of these important documents in what I called the successful,
unsuccessful and an average group.

Of course, I then had to come up with both a method and a
set of features that would entail the basis of my analysis.
To do that, I studied twenty to thirty other reports to get
the flavor of just what the prose "fingerprints" were for these
reports. In the end, I came up with thirty-two characteristics
I thought were important to understanding just what these
documents were made of: twenty-two syntactic and stylistic
features, and ten rhetorical features. These, then, were my
thirty-two variables.

The syntactic and stylistic features included factors like
sentence length, paragraph length, t-unit length, the presence
of passive voice, three types of clauses, the relative frequency
of three-word nominalizations, subject-verb interruption, types
of transitions, multiple prepositional phrases, non-human

grammatical subjects, infinitives, coordinated sentences, and the presence of be and has constructions.

In my preliminary rhetorical analysis, I discovered that there were ten fairly predictable schemes used, things like rhetorical questions, balanced sentences, inverted sentences, permissible sentence fragments, negative-positive restatements, isolation, repetition, convoluted sentences, anticipatory constructions, and rhetorical positioning. Of course, I expected not to find too many of these schemes since too many would destroy their rhetorical effect.

Yet, I needed a central focus, something to prove or refute. I settled on the hypothesis that there were stylistic differences between and among the groups, that the successful group would have a different stylistic "fingerprint" than the average and unsuccessful group.

What I needed now was some way to examine all that prose in an accurate way. I settled on a tact that would make the best use of computer-aided analysis since I had over a million and two hundred and fifty thousand bytes of text to analyze. After I scanned the documents and put them in a readable format, I used the program "Correct Grammar" to give me figures on the total number of words, average sentence length, paragraph length, possible passive voice, and syllables per hundred words. To spot uses of be and has, and the infinitive phrases using to, I used the Oxford University Press Concordance Maker. I gathered data on the other variables by following the laws of scientific sampling for such variables as t-unit length, words per finite,

nonfinite and special clauses, the relative frequency of subject-verb interruption, transitional markers, long prepositional phrases, non-human grammatical subjects, and coordinate sentences.

To analyze for the rhetorical variables I read all thirty narratives looking for the presence of ten rhetorical sentences like balanced sentences, rhetorical questions, rhetorical repetition, and anticipatory constructions.

What I had then was a whole lot of data that I had to somehow analyze in an acceptable way. That meant, of course, statistical analysis. Statistical analysis, among other things, tells people what the chances are that two figures have differences that are just due to chance or whether their differences are meaningful. In other words, there may be something going on. Of course, most statistical analysis is based on the old Bell Curve most of us have been hearing about most of our professional careers.

Testing the data using a modified t-test, a way of seeing how two groups compare to each other statistically, I found that there were significant differences in the variables between the successful and unsuccessful groups in four places, and there were significant differences in the variables between the successful and average groups in two places, and there was one significant difference between the successful and average group. So my statistical study showed that although not many, there were differences between groups.

Of course, while that is interesting information, as

composition teachers, it doesn't tell us much. We need to see
if indeed the differences were related to each other in any
way. Statisticians use a test called the Pearson Correlation
Coefficient to see if these differences mean anything in terms
of each other. Careful analysis revealed that while there were
many correlation within each group, there were only two
correlations were the same for two of the groups. First, in
both the successful and unsuccessful groups, the number of words
per special clause, correlated with the relative frequency of
special subordinate clauses per t-unit, which seems to indicate
that when special clauses appear they appear to increase in
length in those two groups. But such was not the case for the
variables for the relative frequency and the number of words
of the nonfinite and finite clauses (the other two clauses)
which did not correlate in the other groups. The correlation
of the two variables that showed up in the successful and
unsuccessful do not in the average group. Second, the other
correlation was also between the successful and unsuccessful
groups where the relative frequency of finite clauses per t-unit
correlated with the relative frequency of nonfinite subordinate
clauses per t-unit.

In sum, the data analysis suggests that 68.1% of the time
the groups do not vary (15 out of 22) in any significant way
and no two syntactical variables correlated among the three
groups. Without sophisticated statistical analysis, it would
seem "reasonable" to conclude that a number of the variables
would very probably correlate. We may think, for instance, that

the number of words per t-unit would correlate with the relative
frequency of sentences where at least one verb is passive, but
that didn't turn out to be the case. These examples point to
the ability of statistics to transcend wrongful "common sense"
and get to the real similarities and differences among a set
of figures.

The t-test of the rhetorical variables showed that no
significant differences existed among the groups. The correlation
analysis also revealed that there were no significant differences
between groups.

How clean are the data? Are there other figures that could
be used as comparisons? In other words, do other people who
have analyzed the same type of prose come up with similar
figures? Yes, they did. Francis and Kucera gathered similar
figures for words per sentence and passive voice. Paul and Rosner
came up with similar numbers for sentence length although they
were analyzing slightly different kind of prose. Broadhead
and Freed, examining business proposals, cite similar figures
for words per t-unit and words per paragraph (148-149). It
appears, then, that when data are available in comparable types
of writing on the variables I examined, my figures and theirs
are similar.

So what does all this mean? What good is it anyway?

First, we have data that helps to fingerprint the syntactic
and rhetorical characteristics of annual reports. We know how
much passive voice to expect, how long the sentences and
paragraphs are, how long the t-units are, what kind of use the

7

writers make of rhetorical schemes, just to name a few of the bits of information gained from the analysis. In my business writing classes, students often ask how much passive voice is too much? How long should sentences be? How many transitions does a business document need? Now I have that kind of data. In teaching business writing, that makes it possible for us to move away from what Thomas Kent calls "genre teaching," teaching the format for the "bad news letter," for example. Kent goes on, "business writing is destined to move away from [this] narrow view of writing as a set of rules and formulas . . ."(241). But in order stop teaching mere genres, business writing instructors must be armed with a full and rich description of the prose in business. Part of that description must necessarily be an accounting of both the rhetorical and syntactic characteristics of the prose that business writers produce. The figures gathered in this study could be used, in part, to characterize those rhetorical and syntactic characteristics to business writing students.

In turn, business writing students could use these figures to examine their own writing to determine their writing's fingerprint. But are such analyses useful to students?

Edward Corbett in <u>Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student</u> and Margaret Ashida and Leslie Whipp in an article in <u>College English</u> both outline a procedure for students to first analyze the prose of others, which serve as models, and then to analyze their own writing to determine aspects like sentence length, words per paragraph, as well as other characteristics. Corbett

found that students who analyzed the prose of others and their own were "aided in developing [their] own style..." (458). Corbett concluded that close analysis helped students understand how the author produces the effect he or she desires, arguing that close analysis helps students "improve" their writing styles (450). On a similar note, Ashida and Whipp found that students went about the analyses with "apostolic fervor" as students completed an abbreviated version of the Corbett analysis. Ashida and Whipp found that students made "improvement" in such areas as "development of thought, in the coherence of the writing [and] in the manipulation of syntax for rhetorical effect" (21). I have found that when I conducted similar analyses using my figures that students learned a great deal about their own writing, information they could use to improve their ability to express themselves in business prose.

This emphasis on teaching compositional skills is especially important in light of a study by Anita Bednar and Robert Olney who found in their survey of 1987 business school graduates that "university business schools must seek to insure that there graduates are competent in oral and written communication" (22). In particular, of the recent graduates surveyed, 50% listed preparation in written communication as "mandatory," while another 31.3% listed training in written communication as "very important." Significantly, respondents named "written communication" in any form as being so important, but they did not mention training in writing certain genres.

Focusing on one particular form of written communication,

Pamela Rooney and Eileen Evans found that studying annual reports in the classroom provided students with a clearer understanding of how to meet the audience's needs. Students were able to spot places in the report where writers did not communicate clearly with their audiences and to make suggestions about "how the structure and language of content may be shaped to suit the needs of the primary audience" (8).

Finally, my study could prove useful to writers of annual reports, for it is the first detailed study of the prose of successful annual reports. Readability formulae have often been used to "guide" the writers of corporate reports and "measure" the level of difficulty of those documents. As Jack Selzer has stated; however, readability formulae are based on factors not necessarily related to effective writing like the number of syllables per hundred words (23-34). The figures of my study provide thirty other factors that affect the reader's comprehension of a successful annual report.

As important as business writing is to the life of the world, we still have much to learn about how business writing "works." Perhaps, my study will help future writers and students to better understand one aspect of writing at work.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ashida, Margaret and Leslie Whipp. "A Slide-Rule Composition
     Course." College English 25 (October 1963): 18-22.

Bednar, Anita, and Robert Olney. "Composition Needs of Recent
     Graduates." The Bulletin of the Association for Business
     Communication December 1987: 22-23.

Broadhead, Glenn, and Richard Freed. The Variables of
     Composition: Process and Product in a Business Setting.
     Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois Press, 1986.

Corbett, Edward. Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student.
     2nd edition. New York: Oxford university Press, 1971

Kent, Thomas. "Genre Theory in the Area of Business Writing."
     Technical Writing Teacher 14 (Spring 1987): 232-242.

Francis, Nelson, and Henry Kucera. Frequency Analysis of English
     Usage. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1982

Paul, Terri, and Mary Rosner. "Discovering and Teaching Syntactic
     Structures in Three Technical Disciplines." Journal of
     Technical Writing and Communication. 13.2 (1983): 109-122.

Rooney, Pamela, and Eileen B. Evans. "Using Annual Reports to
     Strengthen Business Communication Students' Understanding
     of Audience." The ABCA BUlletin December 1983: 5-9.

Selzer, Jack. "Readability Is a Four-Letter Word." The Journal
     of Business Communication 18 (Fall 1981): 23-34.

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

ERIC

REPRODUCTION RELEASE
(Specific Document)

Paper presented at the 1996 College Conference on Composition and Communi- cation

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: Paper presented at the 1996 Annual 4C's Convention (Milwaukee)
A Syntactical and Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Annual Reports

Author(s): *Dr. Marshall Myers*

Corporate Source: *Dept. of English Eastern Ky. University Richmond, KY 40475*

Publication Date: March 27-30, 1996

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic/optical media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following two options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all **Level 1** documents

> PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
>
> _____ *Sample* _____
>
> TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 1

☑

Check here
For Level 1 Release:
Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical) *and* paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all **Level 2** documents

> PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
>
> _____ *Sample* _____
>
> TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 2

☐

Check here
For Level 2 Release:
Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical), but *not* in paper copy.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but neither box is checked, documents will be processed at **Level 1**.

Sign here→ please

Signature: *Marshall Myers*

Organization/Address: *Dept. of English Eastern Kentucky University*

Printed Name/Position/Title: *Dr. Marshall Myers Associate Prof. of English*

Telephone: *606-622-3090*   FAX:

E-Mail Address: *evsmyers@acs.eku.edu*   Date: *5/29/00*

(over)

III. DOCUMENT AVAILABILITY INFORMATION (FROM NON-ERIC SOURCE):

If permission to reproduce is not granted to ERIC, or, if you wish ERIC to cite the availability of the document from another source, please provide the following information regarding the availability of the document. (ERIC will not announce a document unless it is publicly available, and a dependable source can be specified. Contributors should also be aware that ERIC selection criteria are significantly more stringent for documents that cannot be made available through EDRS.)

Publisher/Distributor:

Address:

Price:

IV. REFERRAL OF ERIC TO COPYRIGHT/REPRODUCTION RIGHTS HOLDER:

If the right to grant reproduction release is held by someone other than the addressee, please provide the appropriate name and address:

Name:

Address:

V. WHERE TO SEND THIS FORM:

Send this form to the following ERIC Clearinghouse:

Acquisitions

ERIC/REC
2805 E. Tenth Street
Smith Research Center, 150
Indiana University
Bloomington, IN 47408

However, if solicited by the ERIC Facility, or if making an unsolicited contribution to ERIC, return this form (and the document being contributed) to:

ERIC Processing and Reference Facility
1301 Piccard Drive, Suite 100
Rockville, Maryland 20850-4305

Telephone: 301-258-5500
FAX: 301-948-3695
Toll Free: 800-799-3742
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov

(Rev. 3/96/96)