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## Professional Communications and Writing Guide

Scholars' professional communications—their writings, their presentations, and their discussions with colleagues and other professionals—reflect the quality of their thought and the strength of their arguments. This *Professional Communications and Writing Guide* has been prepared to offer guidance and support to learners and faculty at Capella University who want to enhance the quality of their professional communications and, in particular, their writing.

The *Professional Communications and Writing Guide* primarily focuses on scholarly writing in the courses (course papers, unit postings, and critiques and responses to learner–colleagues). However, the advice, examples, and guidelines can be applied to all forms of scholarly writing, both in the graduate programs and later in professional life. The key objective of this guide is to articulate a common set of expectations for learners and faculty at Capella University.

The three sections of this guide follow the usual progression in professional writing in our courses.

- Section 1 – Course Posting Guidelines and Examples: offers tips and examples of high-quality initial courseroom postings and of responses to learner–colleagues.
- Section 2 – Course Paper Template and Guidelines: provides information and advice about formatting, style, and content in a scholarly paper.
- Section 3 – Course Paper Sample: shows a sample paper, with many of the common issues and expectations highlighted.

We anticipate expanding the guide periodically to include sections on other kinds of professional communications, such as the preparation of formal or informal reports, scholarly and professional presentations (such as lectures), preparation of papers for publication, and discussions with colleagues.

The faculty of Capella University welcomes feedback and suggestions about this guide. Please direct them to [Mary.Whitman@capella.edu](mailto:Mary.Whitman@capella.edu) or [Stone.Shiflet@capella.edu](mailto:Stone.Shiflet@capella.edu).



## Section 1 – Course Posting Guidelines and Examples

This section presents guidelines and advice for writing successful postings in the Capella University courseroom. This section is designed to articulate clear expectations for the quality of the postings made to answer the discussion questions and to respond to peers in the courseroom. The expectations outlined later in Section 3 should be applied to all forms of courseroom writing, including discussions and assignments. Obviously, e-mail communications are somewhat more private and can be more informal, but the basic standards of professional etiquette should always be followed. You should always try to be as professional as possible in all forms of communication within the courseroom.

This section has two main parts. Part 1 offers guidelines, advice, and an example for successful responses to the discussion questions. Part 1 is further divided into three steps and then followed by a reference list. After that, Part 2 discusses tips for successful responses to course peers. Part 2 also has six suggested examples of good (and not so good) replies to peers and a reference list.

### Part 1: How to Answer Discussion Questions

**Step 1: Understand what the question requires.** Read the discussion questions carefully. Note that most discussion questions will have both a content issue and a level of critical analysis issue. Instructors will evaluate both issues: how well the response addresses the content issue(s) and its level of critical analysis.

*Content issues* require discussion of relevant research and theory—which are presented in required readings for the unit but can also be found in related research identified by the learner—that addresses the content of the question. Opinion (defined as assertions based on personal experience without research support) is not acceptable as the only basis for a response, but opinions may be stated as such. Appropriate and relevant research and theory must be cited in the explication of the content issue.

Analyze the question to ensure that you have identified all the required content issues. Many questions have more than one; answering only one, when there is more than one, weakens your answer. If the question requires more than one content issue, it is acceptable—indeed, it is a best practice—to separate the issues and treat them individually, using appropriate section headings.

Course discussion questions often (though not always) ask for more than one level of critical thinking. Typically, your discussion of the research and theory related to the content issue demonstrates your comprehension and understanding—the lowest level of critical thinking in Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956). Many questions go on to require some *analysis* (Bloom’s mid-level critical thinking). Sometimes, this mid-level analysis is followed by a request for a *synthesis*, an *evaluation*, or an *application* (Bloom’s high-level critical thinking).

The key verbs, indicating the level of analysis, should be clear. For instance, *describe*, *summarize*, or *compare* and *contrast* are common words asking for low-level (comprehension and understanding) critical thinking. At the mid-level, words such as *analyze* or *develop* are common. At the highest level, you will find words such as *synthesize*, *integrate*, or *evaluate*.

When these specific words are not found, look for synonyms or instructions that *imply* the level of critical thinking. For example, if the question asks, “What are three types of qualitative analysis that might be used to study long-term employee reactions to organizational change?” then this is low-level, asking for a description and summary of the theories and research involved in that content area. Note that an answer that merely named three types without any discussion would fail because it provides no evidence of comprehension and knowledge competence. If the question goes on to say, “Design an employee training program using elements from all three approaches,” it is asking for *analysis* and *synthesis* (in order to combine elements [synthesis]), one must first break down the three approaches into component parts [analysis]) and *application* (high-level), which entails using the synthesis to create a new use or application. Words such as *design*, *create*, and *use* indicate a request for application, a higher level of analysis.

**Step 2: Turn your literature review into a draft answer.** After you have completed your study of the literature related to the discussion question topic and are prepared to write your answer, create an outline. If you do not ordinarily write from an outline, it is highly recommended that you do develop the habit, because it will prove to be a very important skill in the capstone projects including comprehensive examinations or integrative projects.

There should be three main parts to your answer, which should always begin by repeating the question:

- An introduction, in which you **restate the question** to be answered and briefly **introduce your response**—one paragraph. State succinctly your core answer to the question, for example, by outlining the main points you will make.
- The body of the answer, in which you **discuss your response in detail**—two to five paragraphs. These paragraphs elaborate and provide details, evidence, and logical support for the points outlined in the first paragraph.
- A conclusion, which provides a conclusion or summary—one paragraph. This paragraph should summarize your answer and include recommendations for your own further study.

Paragraphs should always be developed according to the MEAL Plan. One of the sentences (usually the first) should state the main idea for the paragraph. The other sentences should support the main idea by adding details, subpoints, or evidence. Make sure that you develop your position on each main point with analysis, and then link or include a transition to the next paragraph.

All the paragraphs in the body develop and elaborate on the full answer stated succinctly in the introduction. Hint: If you list the topic sentences of the paragraphs, the list should provide a logically flowing outline of a complete answer to the question. Each of the supporting paragraphs in the body should flow in a logical fashion from the introduction of your position, to a discussion of your position, and finally to a logical conclusion.

Make sure to use the appropriate citations to the sources you reviewed. Scholarly writing requires that all positions be supported by citations to the literature. Best practice is to cite additional sources beyond course texts and required articles (although those are also acceptable). Remember to post the full references in a reference list below the answer. You must use correct

APA sixth edition format and style in your citations and references, and best practice is to use APA style for text as well. (Although we encourage it, you do not have to use APA for responding to other learners.)

Avoid the practice of composing long paragraphs in which you string together a number of ideas from a source and then cite that source after the final sentence. This gives the impression that all the sentences except the last are your ideas, which of course they are not. Instead, use the main idea from the author you are citing as your topic sentence (giving the citation up front), and then build on that idea by adding your own analysis or the related ideas of other authors on the same topic (also citing those sources). (See the Signal Phrases appendix.)

If you discover that your paragraphs look like a string of citation parentheses on the page (that is, each sentence is a citation from another author—or worse, from the same author), you are not doing enough of your own thinking in that paragraph. Go back and revise using the MEAL Plan. You should of course cite each author, but you should also provide your own analysis, synthesis, evaluation, or application of the main ideas. Faculty are not interested merely in what our learners have read of authors—we are interested in what elements of those authors' ideas our learners have understood and integrated, analyzed, synthesized, applied, evaluated, and put to creative uses. The surest way to demonstrate that you understand an author's work is to do high-level critical thinking about it.

**Step 3: Review and revise.** Before you post your discussion answer, read it carefully to make sure that your presentation is reader-friendly and clearly expresses your response. Also, use spell-check and edit your answer for typographical, spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and other editorial errors. These errors detract from the overall evaluation.

Most faculty members prefer that you write in the third person, although some prefer first person as long as the writing is scholarly and formal. Check with your course instructor to be sure you understand his or her preferences. You will be required to write in the third person for final papers, the integrative project (master's programs), the comprehensive examination, and the dissertation (doctoral programs). Course postings can be useful practice.

With practice, you will learn to express your positions comfortably in the third person. Adopt the scholarly habit of thinking of your own ideas and work as being someone else's. This will help you to write in the third person more easily, and it will also help you practice the intellectual skill of considering what challenges, disagreements, or alternative approaches someone might make to your work.

For example, the previous paragraph can be rewritten in the third person without changing the meaning: "Learners writing in the third person learn with practice to express their positions comfortably. Putting one's analysis in the third person fosters the scholarly habit of thinking of one's own work as being someone else's. This in turn promotes ease in third-person writing and strengthens one's ability to consider what challenges, disagreements, or alternative approaches a reader might make to one's work."

Now, we will move on to a discussion of a sample discussion posting, the answer to a unit discussion.

### Sample Discussion Question

Discuss the concept of the glass ceiling in the workplace for women and minorities. Analyze some possible explanations for this issue.

### Sample Answer

<sup>1</sup>This posting will discuss the concept of the glass ceiling for African American women in the workplace. The posting will then address some potential explanations for this issue.

The 2005 population survey data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau showed that 59% of women over 16 were in the labor force. As more and more women enter the world of work, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women who are pursuing managerial and professional careers (Burke & Nelson, 2002). Although there have been clear signs of progress as women have made gains in the workforce, barriers referred to as the “glass ceiling” still exist and prevent women from obtaining the most senior positions in organizations.

The glass ceiling phenomenon is proving to be particularly difficult to crack. The top of the corporate ladder remains male, and the few women who reach the top are paid significantly less than their male counterparts as reported in *The Economist* (“The Conundrum of the Glass Ceiling,” 2005). The percentage of *Fortune* 500 companies where women hold 25% or more of corporate officer roles has doubled since 1995; however, this increased the proportion to only 10% (Catalyst, 2003; Wells, 2001).

Research indicates that progress of women on corporate boards of directors is slowly improving, and women now make up almost 16% of the top-ranking executives in America’s largest corporations (Arfken, Bellar, & Helms, 2004). Traditionally, board members have been chosen from the ranks of existing CEOs, and because CEOs are mostly men, they tend to select others on the board with the same general characteristics—including age, gender, background, and experience (Gutner, 2001). While the number of women on corporate boards is increasing slightly, one can question whether this growth shows real gains.

There are many reasons given for the lack of upward mobility of women. According to Wells (2001), one factor affecting women’s careers is that they tend to leave and reenter the workforce more than men do—interrupting their careers for childbearing, child rearing, elder care, and other family and personal responsibilities. She further asserted that women do not tend to choose career fields that traditionally have the highest earning potential or those that may propel them to the top ranks of companies or professions.

Until companies are able to accept the business case for diversity, the likelihood of women becoming equal partners in the workforce looks dismal. Some companies, however, no longer see the promotion of women solely as a moral issue of equal

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<sup>1</sup>This sample writing was reprinted with permission from Dr. Brenda Thomas, a Capella learner.

opportunity and equal pay. They recognize that mixed groups are better problem solvers than like-minded ones. There is also research that shows a strong correlation between the number of women in top executive positions and improved financial performance among *Fortune* 500 companies between 1996 and 2000 (“The Conundrum of the Glass Ceiling,” 2005).

Organizations seem to be doing a good job in recruiting and hiring capable women; however, it appears that difficulty occurs in developing and retaining managerial women and advancing them into senior management (Burke & Nelson, 2002). Researchers also note that most women in senior management are in staff functions where they have no profit and loss responsibility and limited opportunity to develop the skills required for leadership positions at the upper levels of the corporation (Burke & Nelson, 2002; Combs, 2003).

Women of color have expressed concerns about their potential for advancement, citing the “concrete ceiling” as being even more daunting to penetrate than the glass ceiling faced by their White counterparts (Hite, 2004). An analysis by Catalyst of 1994 to 1995 U.S. Census data found women of color in private sector management to be underrepresented in management positions when compared to White women (Catalyst, 1996; Griscombe & Mattis, 2002). Catalyst reported that of the 57.8 million women in the workforce in 1996, 77.4% were White, 12.1% were African American, 7% were Latina, and 3.6% were Asian/Other. More detailed analysis of this data revealed that White women held 86% of private-sector managerial and administrative positions. African American women held 7% of these positions, Latinas held 5%, and Asian American women held 3%.

In its 1998 study of women of color managers and professionals in *Fortune* 1000 companies, Catalyst explored barriers to career advancement and satisfaction with African American, Hispanic, and Asian American women managers and professionals. Consistent across all ethnic groups was the notion that high-visibility assignments, superior performance, excellent communication skills, and connections with influential others were requirements for career advancement (Catalyst, 1998). Many women of color expressed satisfaction with their jobs, but fewer were satisfied with their pay and with opportunities for advancement. Three years later in its follow-up study on women of color, Catalyst (2002) found the women in this group to be less hopeful about their career prospects; they also felt that there was a decline in opportunities for them to reach senior leadership positions. The participants in this research cited several barriers to success that included lack of influential mentors, exclusion from informal networking with colleagues, and lack of exposure to high-visibility assignments (Catalyst, 2002; Lach, 1999).

African American women in business experience a status called the “double outsider” in that they—unlike White women or African American men—have neither gender nor race in common with most colleagues or managers. This has also been referred to as “double marginalization”—being twice removed from the traditional power base of White males (Griscombe & Mattis, 2002). The double outsider status causes African American women

to be limited in their access to management development and mentoring and their ability to develop credibility and visibility within the organization (Bell & Nkomo, 2001).

In conclusion, research confirms that both sexism and racism affect the career advancement of African American women. Lack of acceptance of African American women as authority figures results in their placement in positions of less authority versus White women even when they hold similar credentials (Griscombe & Mattis, 2002). Further research shows that African American women are the most disadvantaged with respect to promotion opportunities, which plays a significant role in determining when they reach career plateau (Tomkiewicz, Bass, & Vaicys, 2006).

#### References [for the sample posting]

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**Discussion of the sample response.** Notice that the answer to the discussion question started with a restatement of the question itself. This allows the reader to fully grasp what is about to be presented, as well as offering a baseline for evaluating the quality of the response. In the discussion answer in the courseroom, this opening paragraph serves the same purpose as the introduction to a paper, outlining the main points to follow.

Then the answer proceeds to answer the question item by item, as outlined in the opening. Notice that the paragraphs each address a main point, supported by or stemming from (usually) a single source, which is always cited. Additional sources that add to that single main point also appear in some of the paragraphs. In each case, however, the paragraph keeps a single main point.

The author provides his or her own reflection on what he or she studied and integrated from the sources (see second to last paragraph). The author clearly states this as his or her own thoughts, showing how he or she has reflected and integrated the studied material.

Finally, a conclusion not only summarizes the main points of the answer but also provides a suggestion for some further literature review that readers might undertake to deepen understanding of the issue. This is a fine answer to the discussion question posed.

Having briefly examined a high-quality discussion posting, we turn our attention now to how to write great responses to the postings of learner–colleagues in the courseroom.

## **Part 2: Tips and Suggestions on How to Write Great Responses to Classmates' Discussion Answers**

**Suggestion 1: Give plenty of support and add value.** Discussions in the courseroom can become very powerful learning experiences. Telling your colleagues when they have written exceptionally clear, useful, or articulate postings is a wonderful way to enhance the sense of the learning community that we strive for at Capella. That said, required responses that only contain cheerleading comments with no other value added are not sufficient to meet the requirement of critiquing another learner's post. Additional responses beyond the required critique of another learner's post are always welcome and encouraged, and these certainly can be short supportive appraisals. However, if the required critique posting is only supportive and praising—the good element, it fails to give evidence that the posting was read—the downside.

Such responses are unsatisfactory as critiques. For example, submitting “Nice post, Sally. I really learned a lot from you! This will help me in understanding our course material” would be insufficient as a required critique post, although it would be a gracious gesture as an additional reply to your colleague. This does not mean that praise is not acceptable—indeed, praising your colleague's work enhances the quality of your response.

Praise is important. Still, the principle to follow is that critiques ought to add value to your colleagues' original posts. To add value to your response, you must go beyond praise and support. Tell Sally what in her post was helpful, how it enhanced your learning, what issues it clarified, and details on how it clarified the discussion question for you—this specificity gives greater value to your response.

For example, a valuable response might begin with something like this: “Nice post, Sally. I really learned a lot from you. Your explanation of Ford’s theory and especially how it applies to management theory was new to me and very clear.” Then you can go on to deepen the discussion, which we will discuss in the next section.

**Suggestion 2: Remember that this is a discussion on an assigned topic.** Focus your response on the points made by the colleague to whom you are responding. In a face-to-face conversation, the respondent does not immediately change the subject to something he or she is more interested in, nor should that happen in courseroom replies. Instead, good communication skills suggest that the respondent could accurately play back what he or she had heard to be sure he or she understood and then could expand on those ideas, analyzing or commenting on them or raising a question that they brought to mind. Most importantly, the reply would stay on topic, and the topic is what the original post said about the discussion assignment, not a new idea.

Your response also should not jump immediately into your own take on the question, ignoring what your colleague said. Instead, give a sympathetic reading and summary of your colleague’s post, to show that you have read and understand it, before you launch your own counterpoint or different interpretation.

The requirement to critique a colleague’s answer fosters discussion of the *topic assigned for the discussion*. If the question asks for discussion of topics A, B, and C, keep your critique of or reply to your colleague focused on what your colleague wrote about topics A, B, or C. For example, in a course on research methods, a discussion question asks for an analysis of the sampling procedures used in a research article. When learners in that course make their critiques or responses to their colleagues, even when the original answer focuses properly on the sampling procedures, an occasional respondent will go off-topic to ask a question about, say, the article’s conclusions. This is incorrect. Stick to the topic about which you were asked and about which your colleague wrote.

Your response should not stay with the original answer if the original answer does not address the discussion topic, however! In that case, a helpful critique might start with an appreciation of what the colleague did say, followed by a discussion of what the posting did not say, namely, the answer to the asked question. Here is where you can practice the art of providing difficult feedback in a graceful manner, something all professionals must master if they wish to prosper in their chosen fields.

To summarize, then, a high-quality response to a discussion answer would first summarize briefly the main idea or ideas communicated in the original posting, to ensure that those points were grasped. Then, the respondent could add his or her thoughts, always sticking to the topic raised by the discussion question for that unit. Here is an example of a response to the previous sample discussion posting. Remember the requirements of the discussion question: to discuss and analyze the concept of the glass ceiling in the workplace for women and minorities. Here is the example of a high-quality reply:

Sally,

I was interested in two of your points. You noted from one study that the number of women on corporate boards is slowly improving. However, you go on to describe another study that outlined some of the reasons women may lack upward mobility in their companies. Some of those reasons are related to family obligations.

In my own experience in the workforce I see two points. First, women tend to be in positions that do not provide the experience for advancement to high-level executive positions. While many women seem to want to advance, their need to take time off for family, child bearing, and other needs seem to limit their ability to move forward. Second, I see companies trying to address these issues through flexible work schedules, part-time work, telecommuting, and other programs.

I wonder what impact the current downturn in the economy and our unemployment rates have on this issue. From your perspective and the articles you studied, what do you see as the most pressing concerns for African American women to address this issue?

Sincerely,

Joe

This example stays with and expands upon the main points of the original posting. The requirement for using citations and references is relaxed in the reply postings, and the language can be more informal, as befitting a real discussion. The key point is that the reply stays very close to the points of the original posting and to the substance of the assigned topic.

Note too that the last sentence invites further discussion. This is a key factor to the idea of discussion. The greatest learning occurs when people talk more deeply into a topic. This is the aspiration underlying the assignments in the discussion room.

**Suggestion 3: When asking a question, give your own thoughts as background.** Harry Stack Sullivan, an American pioneer psychiatrist who wanted to develop a method of dialogue with his clients, used to discourage his students from asking questions, by noting humorously that questions end with a hook (the question mark), and nobody likes getting hooked (L. Pilling, personal communication, 1973). This is why the so-called tennis-ball question is discouraged. Tennis-ball questions are brief hooks that give no information on which to base an answer and offer no personal investment by the questioner. Here is an example of the tennis-ball response: “Thank you for your post, Sally. Do you think that most women want to advance in their careers?”

What is Sally to make of such a question? The tennis-ball approach has two strikes against it. First, the respondent is not doing any work and gives no clues about what he or she is thinking. Although the question may be a good and honest one, there is no indication to Sally of what points in the original posting that it addresses, no context for how it flows from the original’s ideas, and no description of what the respondent is thinking. If this were a face-to-face conversation, such a tactic would leave Sally very uncomfortable.

And that is the second problem with the tennis-ball approach: Receiving a tennis-ball response can feel a bit intimidating or even hostile, and genuine dialogue rarely comes of it. That was Harry Sullivan's point: Safety for the one who is being questioned leads to genuine dialogue. The community of learning idea means we want to make our colleagues feel safe discussing things with us; this is a core value of professional communications.

Here is an example of a response that raises a new question without hooking Sally with the infamous tennis-ball question:

Sally, I was interested in the second of your two main points, in which you talked about the idea that women continue to “not choose career fields that have the highest earning potential.” As I reflected on that, I think it certainly could be true, and when I read Joe's response to you, I can clearly see that there is some validity to the argument you made.

But I have another question that is related to your point. The idea that women are responsible for the majority of their family needs, thus limiting their career potential seems outdated to me. Perhaps there is solid research out there that supports this position. However, the research you referred to seems to blame women and particularly women of color for their plight in the workplace. Maybe I am not understanding it correctly.

What do you think about this issue? Does the research seem to focus on the women's role alone or are there other factors? I'm curious about your thoughts on the subject.

Thanks, Sally, for an interesting discussion.

-Naomi S.

In this example, the opening summary orients the conversation to the relevant points from the original, and Naomi's thinking and the anecdotal experience behind her question becomes quite clear in the second paragraph. The question that in the tennis-ball approach felt demanding, but now it makes sense and can be discussed in the context of research, theory, or experience.

**Suggestion 4: Remember that “Participation in the Courseroom Discussion” is the standard.** In the final analysis, the degree to which you interact with colleagues determines the true measure of participation, and the Capella model of learning at the graduate level is that participation is a key to learning. Obviously, someone who writes substantive messages to five other learners every unit is participating at a higher level than someone who posts a reply to only one colleague, assuming that both learners post substantive replies that make use of the suggestions above. Conversely, five cheerleading or tennis-ball replies are a lower level of quality participation than one high-quality reply.

Nevertheless, meeting the basic Capella requirement (one post in reply to a colleague's original posting for each discussion question assigned in the Discussion area) or the requirement stated in the individual course is all that needs to be done; it meets the requirement for “satisfactory” (grade B) performance. However, every learner should consider the following: Increased substance and frequency will improve the learning experience. The gold standard for a graduate education is not what score you receive. It is the depth and meaningfulness of your learning and

the critical analysis of that learning. You can evaluate these only in yourself, and only active engagement in scholarly conversation with your colleagues will help you achieve it.

**Suggestion 5: Take good care of the mechanics.** Finally, successful learners check their typing, style, and grammar before leaving the courseroom. Faculty members emphasize this element of scholarship earlier in our programs, as early as in the first foundation courses (FirstCourse), because there are too many learners arriving at capstone projects (integrative projects in the master's programs or the comprehensive examinations in the doctoral programs) without mastering basic grammar, usage, and mechanical skills. So now is the time to learn and master those skills, basic to the craft of the scholar-practitioner.

Remember: Capella offers two very powerful resources for you to use both in the courseroom and at colloquia, and they are the Writing Feedback Tool (in the Capella Writing Center on the learner iGuide) and the Writing Program faculty, who are at every residency. If you have any uncertainties about writing and usage, editorial mechanics, the sixth edition of the APA manual, formatting, plagiarism, or anything else about writing, the faculty wants to take this opportunity to strongly recommend that you ask the Writing Program mentors for help. Contact [Stone.Shiflet@capella.edu](mailto:Stone.Shiflet@capella.edu) directly.

#### Section 1 References

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## Section 2 – Course Paper Template and Guidelines

This section provides a template for a standard course paper (end-of-term product). The sample paper, formatted in APA sixth edition style, is found in Section 3. Section 2 also offers a set of guidelines for constructing and organizing an acceptable paper into major units (introduction, main points or body, and conclusions) and then organizing these units into sections and subsections.

Graduate school and professional writing requires high-level critical analysis along with lower-level understanding and comprehension of the ideas, research, and theories used. This section offers some suggestions for strengthening critical writing, including its organization. Other resources on critical thinking and analysis should be consulted to deepen one's understanding of these issues.

Finally, a set of references to format and style issues in the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* are provided to address common errors. Learners should become familiar with Chapter 2, "Manuscript Structure and Content," on pages 21–59 of the APA manual. No single step will more immediately improve one's writing and scholarly presentation of ideas than becoming familiar with and correctly using these rules.

This section begins with a template of the title page.

**Template: Title Page**

Running head: [ALL UPPERCASE]

1

[The running head contains the keywords from the title. Starting on page 2, it is placed in the page header, which will repeat on each page.]

Title [in uppercase and lowercase letters; in the upper half of the page.]

First Name MI. Last Name

Capella University



### Abstract

[in uppercase and lowercase letters; centered at the top of a new page]

The abstract must be double-spaced and in block format with no left indentation. The sixth edition of the APA manual stipulates that an abstract should not exceed 250 words. The abstract is not an introduction to the subject. It is a summary of every main point in the paper. The reader should have the gist of the entire paper by reading the abstract. The writing should be clear and vigorous and free of extraneous words. The APA manual (pp. 25–27) provides specific guidelines for the abstract. The abstract should cover three points: (a) the topic of the paper—including the question to be answered, thesis to be argued, or problem to be solved (this should be stated not introduced); (b) the main points of the exposition—including research methods used to answer a research question, the main points of the argument, or the key theories or premises of the argument; and (c) the conclusions drawn and recommendations made stemming from the analysis in the middle section. Each segment should be approximately one to three sentences long, unless a complex element requires more description, and the tone should be formal and in the active voice and third person. If sources are used, citations must be included and counted as words.

## Table of Contents

[in uppercase and lowercase letters; centered at the top of a new page]

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**Guidelines for the Table of Contents**

The entire table of contents must be double-spaced. To create the table of contents you may use the Index and Tables tool (in the Insert menu). This feature requires that you use headings consistently throughout the paper, which is also important to do from a formatting perspective. If you need assistance with headings, see pages 62–63 of the APA sixth edition. You can format headings in MS Word to comply with APA style, using the Style tool in the Format menu. We recommend using two or three levels of headings.

### Guidelines for the Main Body of the Paper

- Your paper (unless it is for a special purpose, like a comprehensive examination style paper, an annotated bibliography, or an interview report) must do **one, and only one**, of the following:
  - it should **answer** a clearly stated **question**;
  - it should **argue** or defend a clearly-stated **thesis** (position) or counter-thesis, demonstrating why a particular position (thesis) should or should not be accepted; or
  - it should **pose** a problem and offer a **solution** to it.
- Clear organization is very important. Your topic should be focused and specific, and each of the main points that develop your argument or support it (that is, answer the question or argue the position you are taking) should have its own section. To clearly mark the organization, use **Level 1 headings** for the main sections of your text (see APA, 6th ed., pp. 62–63). Do not be afraid to use Level 2 and Level 3 headings for important subordinate points or subsections within a main section. Most course papers will not need more than three heading levels.
- The body of your paper must have the sections listed below, described in the pages that follow:
  - an introduction that follows the title of the paper;
  - discussion of the main points, each having its own Level 1 heading (you also can use Level 2 headings for subordinate points);
  - a conclusion, which starts with a Level 1 heading; and
  - a reference list.
- If you use **tables or figures**, follow APA sixth edition rules to format them (pp. 125–167). Place each table or figure inside your text as close to your mentioning it as possible.
- Rarely will a course paper need an **appendix** to present material that would distract the reader if included in the main body of the paper. See pages 38–40 of the sixth edition of the APA manual for guidance.
- Although **grammar, usage, and mechanics** (“G/U/M”) are a local concern, they are still very important. All grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation should conform to good English composition as codified by the sixth edition of the APA manual. Elaine Hacker’s books and handbooks are also a handy and very helpful baseline for good grammar. Follow APA guidelines when you are uncertain of formatting, style, grammar, or usage.

[Note: Although these guidelines are single-spaced, your entire paper must be double-spaced.]

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### The Introduction to the Paper

[Use title of the paper in uppercase and lowercase letters and centered at the top of a new page.]

1. The introduction to the paper, which should not have “Introduction” as a heading, follows immediately below the title of the paper, which is typed in uppercase and lowercase letters and centered. (There is no heading labeled “Introduction” since it is assumed all papers begin with an introduction; see APA, 6th ed., p. 27.)
2. In a course paper, the introduction section should state the **question** to be answered, the **thesis** to be argued, or the **problem** to be solved. If the paper is a special purpose paper (e.g., an annotated bibliography or an interview report), the introduction should make the paper’s purpose clear and identify the types of issues that will be addressed.
3. The introduction should provide a **brief background of the main issues** involved in the question, thesis, or problem. It should not provide a lengthy theoretical overview of the entire field of study. For example, if the question you are writing about is whether *X* is an effective method of leadership for *Y* project teams, it is not necessary to go into detail about the history of leadership or the origins of project management in the United States. Nor is it necessary to discuss in great detail the origin and development of the *X* leadership theory (or its relationship with any other form of leadership). An acceptable background passage would include a brief description of the problems that make the new leadership strategy necessary, sufficient information for the reader to understand what *X* leadership consists of and what the problems of *Y* project team applications look like, and a brief outline of why *X* might be useful in addressing the problems of *Y*. These points, while limited in scope, should be supported with citations to the relevant literature. In the introduction, these citations should be given succinctly; they will be more fully elaborated and critically evaluated in the main body of the paper (see below).
4. Next, the introduction should also state the **main points** that will be developed in the paper to answer the question, argue the thesis, or solve the problem. The logic of the argument should be apparent to the reader. In the case of a special paper (such as a report of an interview), the main themes that will be addressed should be stated. This requirement makes **outlining** your paper an important step, because creating an outline will assist you in ensuring that your paper indeed has main points and that those main points indeed are lined up logically. Make sure that the brief statement of the main points of your argument (in the introduction) follows the order in which the points are handled in the body of the paper.
5. The introduction should also briefly state the **conclusions** that the paper will reach, without going into detail about them. In the case of a special paper, there should be a clear statement of what you took away from the experience of preparing the paper.
6. Many writers write the introduction after the main body of the paper is finished.
7. Your theme in the introduction is “Tell them what you will tell them.”

## The Body of the Paper

[Level 1 heading; use words appropriate to your topic]

### Organization of the Body of the Paper

[This is a Level 2 heading; use words appropriate to your topic.]

- The organization of the main body of the paper should follow the points stated in the introduction. The key is that the main points line up logically to support the objective of the paper. Again, an outline will prove helpful. In the case of special papers, the actual assignment may predetermine the outline.
- Keep your focus: Stick to the main points stated in the introduction. **Answer** the question, **argue** the thesis, or **solve** the problem. Do not introduce unrelated or tangential ideas in the main body of the paper. (See the next point.)
- Follow exactly the logic and outline you wrote in the introduction, if you wrote that first. If you will write your introduction last, Capella faculty highly recommend that you have and stick to an outline. If in working on the main body, you come across new information that changes your argument, be sure to revise the introduction to include the new points.

### Literature Review Section

[This is also a Level 2 heading; use words appropriate to your topic.]

- In the main body, you will be describing, evaluating, and drawing conclusions from the literature that you reviewed for this paper and may have mentioned briefly in the introduction. You should present the literature review as follows:
- Describe the particulars of the studies (population, approach, methods, and findings) or the main points of the theories (key concepts and variables). Remember that your readers did not read the study, so they need to know what the study actually did and what it was designed to do.
- Evaluate the strength of the research you reviewed. (For example, a study that has a sample of five people is weak when it comes to generalization to an entire population. Its findings should be considered with caution, and you should state that in your analysis.) Other factors to evaluate include the correctness of the methods related to the research question, the appropriateness of the instruments, and the logic of the interpretation of the conclusions.
- Discuss the articles' conclusions in terms of how they support or challenge your own position, which is the focus of the paper.

## Evaluation of the Literature

[This is also a Level 2 heading; use words appropriate to your topic.]

- **Critical thinking** is crucial in the main body of the paper. Do not just report studies; **evaluate** them (see the preceding point). Do not merely analyze or compare-and-contrast; these steps are important, but you do them when you report on the studies. Try to synthesize or integrate studies (bring disparate studies together to focus on the same issue) and always evaluate them. Are the studies you are presenting well designed and logically interpreted? Do they support your point? If they challenge your point, can you show why they fail to do so successfully?
- Critical thinking also requires that you give those who see things differently their due. Search for alternative hypotheses, opposing views, and differing explanations. Report these too, and analyze and evaluate their strengths. If the opposing views are stronger and more robust, be humble enough to adopt them or acknowledge them. If you do not adopt them in the end, explain why not.

## Alternative Explanations and Approaches

[This is also a Level 2 heading; use words appropriate to your topic.]

- When you have adopted a position (based on your literature review and evaluation), mention alternative explanations, even if the original author(s) failed to do so. This shows high-level critical and creative thinking about the research you are relying on and about your own work.
- After you finish the main body of the paper, write a brief summary of your main points and a transitional sentence or paragraph looking ahead to the Conclusion section.
- Your theme in the main body of the paper is “Tell them what you have to tell them.”

## Conclusion

[Level 1 heading]

- In the conclusion section, you should once again summarize the main points. Your summary need not be more than one or two sentences, since you already provided one in the ending of the main body (see above). Most important: be sure to answer the question you raised for the paper in a very clear statement. For example, if your paper raised the question “What approaches to change management are most effective when midsize manufacturing companies are faced with requirements to downsize?” you should answer it clearly. Do not leave it to your readers to draw their own conclusions. Readers may disagree with your conclusions, but they should know what they are and how you came to them. Showing them the how is the job of the main body of the paper. Your theme in the conclusion is “Tell them what you told them.”
- What do your conclusions mean? Offer your interpretation of the meaning of your conclusions about the thesis, your answer to the question, or your solution to the problem.
- Include a subsection evaluating the strengths and weaknesses (limitations) of your paper. Could it be organized in a better way? Might you have explored different literatures if you had had more time? If you had this paper to do over again, how would you improve it? In a term paper, this discussion need not be extensive, but give evidence that you have considered it. Critiquing your own work is excellent practice for your comprehensive exams, dissertation, or integrative project.
- What questions has this paper raised for you that go beyond its topic? Include a subsection about recommendations for future study that proposes questions that you think should be investigated further, related problems remaining to be solved, or elements of the thesis that were not argued fully. Again, this need not be extensive, but practice it in every paper you write.
- Finally, take your final position. Is there anything you want to say about the issues you have discussed in this paper? At the graduate level, it is appropriate to take a position, to state your own opinion based on the research you have done. Do it here. It is also acceptable to describe any takeaway messages you got from doing the project.
- Be sure to use third-person writing throughout the entire paper. Some authors try to make their writing more formal by using the word *we*, but this is inappropriate and misleading. Was there more than one person writing the paper and doing the literature review and evaluation? If there is only one name on the title page, there should not be *we* writing the paper!

## References

[in uppercase and lowercase letters; centered at the top of a new page]

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

The reference list must comply with Chapter 7 of APA sixth edition. Perfection is the standard. Here are some common reference list errors (per Capella University faculty experience):

- Incorrect capitalization of or failure to italicize titles of books and journals. Capitalize only the first word of book titles (and the first word after a colon), but capitalize all main words of a journal title.
- Incorrect capitalization of journal article titles. Capitalize only the first word (and the first word after a colon).
- Incorrect citation of Web-retrieved articles.
- Incorrect italicization of book and journal titles. Italicize book titles and titles of journals. Edition numbers (in parentheses), chapter titles, and article titles are not italicized.
- Incorrect use of ampersand (&) versus *and* when referencing multiple authors of a particular work. In reference lists, use ampersand before the last author listed.
- Incorrect use of commas and periods in citations and reference lists. (For in-text citations, a common error includes placing periods before rather than after the author-year citation in a sentence.)
- Too frequent use of secondary or tertiary sources (such as textbooks, summary articles, and reviews) rather than primary sources (original research or theory). Use primary sources at least 75 percent of the time.
- Unnecessary inclusion of the issue number after the volume number in a reference to a periodical. Include the issue number only if the pages are numbered in each issue starting at 1.
- Inclusion of in-text citations not referenced in the reference list.
- Inclusion of references that are not cited in the text.



## Appendix

[in uppercase and lowercase letters; centered at the top of a new page]

Note: In a course term paper, an appendix is unlikely to be necessary. Use an appendix only if the paper refers to some document, instrument, data set, or other material that the reader should be able to see but that would distract if included in the main text.

### APA Format and Style Issues

The pages cited below from the sixth edition of the APA manual do not represent every APA requirement. They are areas that represent errors commonly made in papers, as reported by faculty instructors across Capella.

- *Title page* (p. 229).
- *Abstract* (pp. 25–27)
- *Table of contents*—not usually required but may be at the instructor’s preference. If using one, go to the Insert menu (MS Word) and use the Index and Tables tool or the Table of Contents tool. The inclusion of two heading levels is recommended.
- *Formatting and order of pages* (pp. 228–230).
- *Sample papers* (pp. 41–59). A sample paper is also included in this writing guide in Section 3, and your paper should look very similar to it. You may not utilize everything illustrated, but if you do, use the sample as a guide.
- *Headings*—appropriate use is very important (pp. 62–63).
- *Series*—knowledge of all types is very important (pp. 63–65).
- *Spelling* (p. 96).
- *Text citations*—brief notes that identify sources used in the text (pp. 169–192).
- *References* (pp. 193–224).
- *Quotations* (pp. 170–174).
- *Tables and figures*—if you use them (pp. 125–167).
- *Appendices*—if you use them (pp. 38–40).



### Section 3 – Course Paper Sample

The sample paper was written for the School of Business; however, its basic precepts are applicable across the entire university.<sup>2</sup> To maintain consistency, instructors should require strict APA formatting; however, you should always ask instructors their preferences on the first day of class. Unless otherwise indicated, this paper adheres to the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. (See the sample papers in the APA manual on pages 41–59.)

Running head: ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING AND STRATEGIC PLANNING<sup>3</sup>

1

#### Organizational Learning as an Advantage in the Strategic Planning Process<sup>4</sup>

Name of Learner

Capella University

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<sup>2</sup> General guidelines include setting uniform 1-inch margins at the top, bottom, left, and right of each page and using a uniform typeface—preferably Times New Roman or Courier—and font size (usually 12-point) throughout the paper.

<sup>3</sup> The running head should contain the keywords from the title (APA, 6th ed., p. 229). Place the page number after the running head in the manuscript header (see APA, p. 230).

<sup>4</sup> Begin the title 3 inches from the top of the paper.

## Abstract

<sup>5</sup>The topic of organizational learning as it relates to strategic planning and implementation is explored in this course paper. After grounding the reader in organizational learning and environmental scanning, the paper presents an approach for successful implementation and measurement of a learning initiative. The influence and importance of critical factors to support learning, such as organizational readiness, culture, and infrastructure, are also covered in the paper. At the conclusion of the paper, the reader will have an understanding of the dimensions of organizational learning, challenges that can impede learning, prerequisites for a successful initiative, and the role of the executive team.

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<sup>5</sup> **The abstract should be left aligned, with no indentation. It should not exceed 250 words (APA, 6th ed., pp. 27).**

Table of Contents<sup>6</sup>

Abstract	Page number
Table of Contents	Page number
List of Tables	Page number
Organizational Learning	Page number
The Dimensions of the Learning	Page number
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Cultural Considerations	Page number
Learning on the Executive Team	Page number
Environmental Scanning	Page number
Scanning the Macroenvironment	Page number
Scanning Within the Industry	Page number
Knowledge Creation, Acquisition, and Dissemination	Page number
Implementation	Page number
Initial Implementation of Organizational Learning Principles	Page number
Creating an Environment for Continuous, Iterative Learning	Page number
Measurement Tools	Page number
Conclusion	Page number
References	Page number

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<sup>6</sup>The APA manual does not mention a table of contents, but if it is an instructor's preference, please consider this example as a model. If including a table of contents, go to the Insert menu (in Microsoft Word) and select the Index and Tables tool or the Table of Contents tool.

<sup>7</sup>Indent the Level 2 headings in the table of contents.

List of Tables

Table 1. Tangible and Intangible Resources

Page number

### Organizational Learning as an Advantage in the Strategic Planning Process<sup>8</sup>

Organizational learning took center stage in the 1990s with Peter Senge's (1990) work on systems thinking and learning pathways. The escalating rate of globalization and change in the workplace has only fueled the need for organizations to learn in a generative manner. More than a training initiative, organizational learning seeks to drive evolving improvement in the way firms operate and respond to the external environment by careful review and renewal. Burnes, Cooper, and West (2003) made a case for organizational learning with four propositions: (a) a firm's ability to keep up with change is related to its ability to learn, (b) an unstable environment drives the need for new forms of learning, (c) training cannot be reserved only for management since they are overwhelmed by the pace of change, and (d) true organizational learning takes place with a firm's entire workforce. <sup>9</sup>In order for an organization to craft and implement strategies that support survival and prosperity in such times of rapid change, the organization can no longer rely solely on existing knowledge and prior experience. In the interest of moving forward, active, effective learning must be a priority of the executive team and the entire organization. Executive behavior, organizational culture, and the priority of learning in the organization influence the ability of the firm to make learning a strategic advantage.

### The Dimensions of Learning<sup>10</sup>

According to scholarly literature <sup>11</sup>(Argyris, 1993; Bierly, Kessler, & <sup>12</sup>Christensen, 2000; Nevis, DiBella, & Gould, 1995), learning is multidimensional and influenced by many

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<sup>8</sup> Do not use "Introduction" as the heading. Instead, type the paper's title with title-case capitalization.

<sup>9</sup> Use two spaces between sentences (APA, 6th ed., p. 88).

<sup>10</sup> This is a Level 1 heading. Typically, two or three levels of headings are adequate for a course paper.

factors. Most current literature breaks learning into single-loop and double-loop processes.

Nevis et al. and Argyris extended the dimensions of learning by describing generative learning, an iterative process where an individual or organization continually challenges and modifies the approach to various problems or processes.

### **Single-Loop and Double-Loop Learning<sup>13</sup>**

According to Bierly et al. (2000),<sup>14</sup> single-loop learning occurs within the firm's existing context. Correction and repair are examples of single-loop learning aimed at preventing the repeat of an undesired situation. These are simple feedback control systems like a thermostat; no one questions how the trigger level was set or whether it should be changed. Action is taken in response to exceeding a trigger level. According to Picken and Dess (1997), the performance measurement is goal versus actual, without consideration for revisiting the goal. From a systems perspective, many natural occurrences follow a simple, single feedback approach; examples include the body's ability to maintain a constant temperature through sweating or the cycles of forest fires and reseeded. Von Bertalanffy's (1972) seminal work on systems methodology was grounded in such biological systems.

Single-loop learning may result in minor improvements within existing constraints, but it does not look beyond the current paradigm to progress to an improved mode of operation. The

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<sup>11</sup> When multiple works are cited within parentheses, place the citations in alphabetical order and separate with semicolons.

<sup>12</sup> Use an ampersand (&), not *and*, in a citation within parentheses.

<sup>13</sup> Level 2 heading.

<sup>14</sup> Use *et al.* (not italicized) after a work with three, four, or five authors has been cited once. (Note that there is not a comma before *et al.* and that there is a period only after *al.*) If a work has six or more authors, however, you may use *et al.* for the first and subsequent citations (APA, 6th ed., p. 175).



benefit of single-loop learning is limited because the conditions that favored the error often persist. Like the thermostat, the same correction occurs again and again, each time triggered by the existing set point. Businesses operating in a stable, straightforward environment may be able to coexist with single-loop learning for some time; however, coexistence may not equate with desired growth, profitability, or achievement of the firm's strategic goals. Even the most static corporate environment is constantly changing as a system, due to changes in the external environment or the erosion of internal knowledge about the industry.

By contrast, double-loop learning is active, continuously monitoring “assumptions, goals, and strategies,” challenging and adjusting as necessary (Picken & Dess, 1997, p. 41).<sup>15</sup> Also subject to challenge are the existing policies, processes, and day-to-day operation of the firm. These constantly fluctuating influences change the context of the problem, the solutions, and the path forward. The organization that undertakes double-loop learning realizes that current problems may not be resolvable with current modes of behavior, leadership, thinking, knowledge sharing, and communication. Nevis et al. (1995) termed this iterative process generative learning. Generative learning allows the organization to move forward.

Consequently, learning is always taking place in the organization, either as a dysfunctional cycle that repeats the same errors (single loop) or as a positive, continually improving method of operation (double loop). The upper echelon has a responsibility to monitor organizational learning, driving improvements that sustain and improve the company's capacity for survival. Argyris and Schön (1996) described this approach as questioning “theories in use,” or the habit of determining the sufficiency of current practices (p. 16). Factors that contribute to

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<sup>15</sup> Cite a page number for a direct quotation.

organizational learning and improvement include openness to change, active environmental scanning, a commitment to continual learning at all levels, and a systems perspective (Nevis et al., 1995). Without infusion of new ideas or information, change is unlikely to occur (Garvin, 1993). An important consideration for organizational learning involves the company culture and readiness for learning. Strategy is traditionally considered in the business sense. Teaching an organization to learn for sustainable business achievement is also a form of strategy.

### **Cultural Considerations**

An organization's culture is shaped by the macroenvironment, industry, competition, and company history (Ahmed, Loh, & Zairi, 1999). Internally, the organizational culture reflects “what people worship” (Schneider, Brief, & Guzzo, 1996, p. 9). Beliefs and values are demonstrated in the choices of executives and fellow employees, their processes, and motivators. A volume-oriented manufacturing organization may create reward systems around measures of first-pass yield and shippable units instead of defects per unit. Beyond these beliefs and values, a more complex system emerges with myths, sagas, language (acronyms and metaphors), symbols (logos, slogans, and honors), rituals, value systems, and behavior norms (Higgins & McAllaster, 2004; Shrivastava, 1985, p. 103). Myths and sagas—sometimes reaching folklore proportions—embody the company history to maintain a shared perception of how employees view significant events such as restructuring, acquisition, or poor financial performance. Shrivastava (1985) indicated that these stories contain heroes, villains, battlefields,<sup>16</sup> and war stories (p. 104). Although some top management teams might relegate such behavior to rank-and-file employees, the executive circle surely contains its own share of war stories, struggles, boardroom antics, and

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<sup>16</sup>Use commas after each item in a series.

historical accounts of the good old days. Organizational learning is a systemic approach to continual improvement—throughout all levels of the firm. Learning may be limited by the capacity for cultural change. Nutt, Backoff, and Hogan (2000) discussed the conflict between desire for organizational tradition and the need to progress. When preservation of status quo is desirable, more control is appropriate. When external clues suggest that progress and change are necessary, a flexible environment may be more productive.

Argyris (1993) contended that the origin of single-loop errors is a mismatch of an intended outcome with the actual outcome. When the error occurs, individuals and groups within the organization react by initiating what Argyris termed *defensive routines*. These routines are behaviors aimed at reducing the risk of embarrassment or threatening outcomes for members of the management team. Unfortunately, the defensive routines also preclude important opportunities for the organization to challenge current practices and to learn from mistakes. Status quo is maintained at the expense of questioning an ineffective operation, and the cycle of denial and avoidance continues. Shimizu and Hitt (2004) discussed the dangers of such heuristics that no longer serve the best interest of the organization. When the executive team ignores feedback from the external environment—especially negative feedback, the organization’s inability to course correct in sufficient time may eventually require substantial change.

True cultural change takes place at the level of “practices, procedures and routines” (Schneider et al., 1996, p. 12). Depending on the organization’s openness and ability to change on its own, a top management team may determine that total organizational change (TOC)<sup>17</sup> is in

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<sup>17</sup> Use acronyms for frequently used terms.

order. This magnitude of change impacts all aspects of the firm—structure, employees, functional subunits, procedures and policies, titles, and compensation. Fundamental changes to company operations may be required to move the firm toward improved profitability or other strategic goals.

Schneider et al. (1996) contrast TOC to a “silver bullet approach” (p. 12). A silver bullet aimed at a shift change in culture is unlikely to provide sustainable improvement because it is not pervasive enough in a complex, resistant culture. Although total quality management (TQM) is considered a TOC effort, results are often disappointing because executive management do not adequately prepare the organization for the change. Another consideration is that the executive team’s skills may be insufficient to effect such large-scale change.

Garvin (1993) suggested three considerations prior to embarking on the transition to a learning organization: (a) an evaluation of the current organizational status, (b) a healthy respect for the learning curve associated with large degrees of change, and (c) an appreciation of cultural operating styles, such as individual learning versus community learning. Groups that have not been encouraged to learn as a group, including executive teams, will not suddenly transition to a communal means of learning without some coaching. Established organizations initiated after the Second World War often maintain an autocratic management style that operates under tight control at the executive level (Picken & Dess, 1997). Learning is neither encouraged nor well understood in this type of environment.

Kriegesmann, Kley, and Schwering (2005) indicated that these tightly controlled corporate environments carry a fear of errors and a resulting incompetence at learning. Efforts to maintain control only foster the cycle and further entrench behaviors of hiding, distorting, or

denying important information (Argyris, 1993). Stagnant ideas and strategies permeate the annual planning meetings, and the senior team is left unprepared when the chief executive retires or is forced out. Even these dysfunctional situations define a culture, and organizational cultures are not readily changed (Picken & Dess, 1997). Executive teams and organizations with much at stake can learn to experiment and fail in small ways. Kouzes and Posner (2002) cited the criticality of learning through failure. By setting small goals and achieving early, “small wins,”<sup>18</sup> an organization becomes more comfortable with venturing beyond tradition and learning from mistakes (Kotter, 1995; Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 208). The greater danger is never expanding the scope of options or exercising critical thinking skills. Inherent in learning is seeing something from a different perspective. This can be a difficult transition for an executive team that prides itself on tenure, position in the organization, tried and true heuristics, and years of experience in a given industry.

### **Learning on the Executive Team**

The decision to pursue active, double-loop learning is only the beginning. Effective implementation, even at the executive level, can be a challenge. Ahmed et al. (1999) reported that learning occurs at three levels—individual, group, and organization. Warning that the presence of specific traits does not ensure organizational learning, the authors noted that research does indicate certain supportive factors. At the individual level, intrinsic motivation is more successful than efforts at extrinsic rewards or consequences. Fear of failure or embarrassment can serve as strong deterrents to risk taking, innovation, or exposure of negative information (Ahmed et al., 1999; Argyris, 1993).

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<sup>18</sup> Use double quotation marks to accentuate a word or phrase (APA, 6th ed., p. 91).

Factors that appear to contribute to learning within an executive team include diversity, an appropriate level of cohesiveness, good communication, and sufficient resources to allow periodic reflection and assessment (Bierly et al., 2000). Team cohesiveness has demonstrated a curvilinear relationship with group learning. When the team is too cohesive, the risk is greater for groupthink and reluctance to break ranks with dissenting ideas. Cognitive diversity refers to heterogeneity in skill, experience, education, tenure, and other factors that influence decision making. While the homogeneous group may reach consensus more quickly, decision quality can be compromised if the topic is not sufficiently explored (Pitcher & Smith, 2001). In a flat hierarchy and in a structure with fewer layers, openness to learning is encouraged when the company is doing poorly against performance objectives (Valentino, 2004). Conversely, highly-matrixed organizations with poor communication, domineering leadership, and isolation from the external environment are often inept and unskilled at learning.

The chief executive officer (CEO) plays a crucial role in organizational vision, strategy, and learning. Effective CEOs are able to communicate personal vision, values, and experience to the executive team in a manner that fosters learning and initiates action (Barnett & Tichy, 2000). When the organizational strategy is devoid of a compelling vision, mission, and values, the managers revert to personal definitions of appropriate action based on previous, but potentially irrelevant, experience (Valentino, 2004). Habit or myth, such heuristics can perpetuate undesired cultural traditions and support poorly crafted strategies.

Shrivastava (1985) reported that myths can misdirect a strategy when the team focuses on the wrong thing and seeks to make an organizational myth fit the situation, instead of crafting a strategy to address the issues. Even language issues can stunt generation of effective solutions

and limit strategy options. For example, an executive team whose culture contains words characteristic of a defensive military approach sets up a strategic planning ritual that considers collaborative options such as partnering, comarketing, or distribution.

### **Environmental Scanning**

Environmental scanning includes the macroenvironment and the industry served by the organization (Porter, 1979). Forces in the macroenvironment impact most organizations in some manner; these forces include (a) the local, national, and world economies, (b) the natural and political environments, (c) legal and regulatory constraints, (d) resources, and (e) technology. Within an industry, organizations must remain current with rivals' statuses, the bargaining power of buyers, the bargaining power of suppliers, the threat of substitution, and changing entry and exit barriers. Organizations that once held protective patents or dominant market shares may become complacent or ignore subtle market changes that signal danger to an outdated strategy. An outdated strategy, tenured top management team tenure, and a homogeneous cognitive environment may spell trouble to the organization without active learning practices.

Rowland and Smith (2001) profiled the journey of a British medical device manufacturer as it made the transition to a market-led culture. The four essential steps in the transformation were (a) full agreement among the top management team to change the culture, (b) a deliberate shift in job specifications with emphasis on strategic thinking and market understanding, (c) investment in personal development and assessment tools, and (d) formal skills training. The cultural change led to more informed resource allocation, the implementation of a market-oriented vocabulary, and improvements in achieving financial targets. Equally impressive were the absence of turnover in senior staff and the absence of technical skills degradation in the

organization. Leadership and support from the executive team promoted changes in the strategy and in the culture. Weerawardena's (2003) work cited similar benefits when firms integrated market-based learning into organizational capability.

### **Scanning the Macroenvironment**

Financial and legal resources overlap with other environmental factors that impact a firm's strategic decisions. Physical, intellectual, human, informational, relational, organizational, and reputational factors are controlled by the firm but can introduce significant variability when considered collectively. Begun and Kaissi (2004) noted that human resources respond better to more flexible organizational structures during times of uncertainty than they do to bureaucratic structures—largely due to enhanced communication. In general, natural resource considerations also include labor availability, raw materials, and impact to the natural environment. Valentin's (2001) list of nine resource types, shown in Table 1, presents a collective challenge for firms assessing their strategic options.

Macroenvironmental analysis and intra-industry analysis to support effective strategic planning must occur in tandem for several reasons: (a) the external environment is a dynamic influence on the segment as a whole and to an individual competitor in varying degrees, and (b) the intra-industry competitive environment is dynamic and may be exacerbated by macroenvironmental influences.



Table 1

*Tangible and Intangible Resources*

Resource	Considerations
Financial	Cash and access to financial markets
Physical	Equipment, facilities, and raw materials
Intellectual	Expertise and discoveries
Human	Individual expertise and skills
Informational	Customer intelligence and competitive intelligence
Relational	Customer relations, alliances, vendor relationships, and stakeholder relationships
Organizational	Culture, customs, shared vision, values, and structure
Reputational	Brand names and good will
Legal	Patents, trademarks, and contracts

*Note.* Adapted from “SWOT Analysis From a Resource-Based View,” by E. K. Valentin, 2001, *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice*, 9(2), p. 55. Copyright 2001.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> A table or figure from another source must be fully referenced, as in this table note. Also required—but missing from this table note—is a statement acknowledging the written permission of the copyright owner (see APA, 6th ed., p. 128).

**Scanning Within the Industry**

Hambrick (1981) articulated the relationship between environmental scanning and coping with uncertainty. Understanding one's competitor and remaining current with industry trends make good preventive action sense. Benchmarking competitive products, following changes in supplier industries, staying abreast of technology changes, and remaining close to customers constitute ongoing industry scanning (Dess & Picken, 2000). Once reserved for the executive staff, industry scanning now extends further in the organization. Valuable information can be gained through conversations with field service representatives, customers, supply chain vendors, technical staff, and the sales force. The upper echelon needs to value and use the eyes and ears of staff at all levels of the organization (Dess & Picken, 2000).

**Knowledge Creation, Acquisition, and Dissemination**

Tandem with organizational learning is organizational knowledge. Three types of knowledge exist in an organization—beliefs, tacit knowledge, and explicit knowledge. The firm must manage beliefs and foster tacit and explicit knowledge to adequately support the learning and the strategic planning process. Beliefs represent a type of knowledge at the individual level. Formed by impressions of reality, this information may be supported not by hard facts but by perception (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000). When the individual is convinced that perceptions are true, it becomes difficult to dissuade the belief. Tacit knowledge may contain a level of perception, but it also includes real experience that is often shared by a work group.

Tacit knowledge consists of know-how, mental models, organizational routines, and problem-solving techniques (Lubit, 2001, p. 16). This type of knowledge is often difficult to share or cascade throughout the organization because much of it is gained through experience and rarely written down. When an organization loses older employees to retirement or

reorganization, tacit knowledge can be eliminated. Explicit knowledge is recorded in the form of procedures, policies, process maps, schematics, design documentation, and various forms of organizational records. Dissimilar, yet complementary, these two forms of knowledge support the life and planning of an organization.

Several effective methods can ensure that important tacit and explicit knowledge are disseminated appropriately in the organization. Mentoring-based learning can serve to cascade information from the executive level throughout other functions, simultaneously strengthening management competencies. Lubit (2001) recommended training managers how to coach, integrating coaching into performance requirements and using retrospective analysis sessions to debrief important tacit knowledge. An effective knowledge management system must be in place to encourage data collection and retrieval for ongoing learning. Suitable database capability and requisite training, readily available technical support, and rewarding knowledge-sharing behavior are important for encouraging the learning culture. Failure to establish a knowledge-sharing culture may be due to structural, behavioral, or resourcing issues. Structures that protect information and limit knowledge sharing foster a knowledge-is-power value system. Employees with little exposure to the external environment or industry dynamics may develop a resistance for input from outsiders. Finally, when resources and time are limited for knowledge management and creation, employees learn that information sharing is neither valued nor encouraged. Executive management may unintentionally sabotage learning and knowledge creation with organizational structure and communication practices and by failing to involve others outside the senior management team (Dess & Picken, 2000; Kotter, 1995).

### **Implementation**

The creation of a learning organization is incomplete unless implementation is successful. Implementing an environment of learning at the executive level, and again at the organizational level, is no small feat. Factors that influence the ability to learn have been summarized in the previous sections—awareness of the need for change, the ability to accept the need for change, fear of failure, a plan for creating and housing knowledge, the ability and willingness to share knowledge, and a plan for sustaining the learning environment.

#### **Initial Implementation of Organizational Learning Principles**

Senge (1996) offered some cornerstones of implementation—shared vision, thinking as a collective whole, and practice. The organization intent on learning and progressing needs to anchor to a shared vision. The vision will keep them on track and can be used as a balance for weighing suggested changes or strategies. Kotter (1995) cautioned that a poorly or infrequently communicated vision can lessen implementation effectiveness. A commitment to thinking and learning as a team can yield new alternatives when individuals are less concerned about promoting a single point of view. As with most new endeavors, practice eases learning and moves the organization forward. An experienced business team that is inexperienced at learning will need to make room for challenging discussions and healthy debate. Planning for learning must address several components.

Implementing a learning environment takes time, human resources, effort, and data storage and dissemination capability. Consider the organization that does not currently pursue active learning. Most meeting schedules, postcommercialization activities, manager-to-employee relationships, and information technology infrastructure will not be set up to promote learning. These are obstacles that impose conflicting priorities for staff and employees. While

supporting the initiative may be mandated from the executive team, making time for the learning may be perceived as a threat to accomplishing routine work and required planning.

Strategic planning is often an annual event that generates only a modest revision to a decade old plan. Making time for environmental scanning, analysis, dissemination of information, and mentoring will require behavioral changes and allocation of time. Cross and Baird (2000) maintained that sustained learning requires creation of organizational memory. Small steps toward converting learning to memory include retrospective analyses incorporated into company processes, triaging the most important areas for learning, and proactively creating the infrastructure to house and promote sustained knowledge transfer. Sinkula, Baker, and<sup>20</sup> Noordeweir (1997) pointed out that before learning can occur organizations must be able to (a) collect, house, and disseminate information and (b) develop the skills to appropriately interpret and operationalize the information.

### **Creating an Environment for Continuous, Iterative Learning**

Assuming that the CEO and top management team recognize the need to incorporate active learning into their skill sets, a consultant or facilitator may be of value, especially in cases where the tenure of the CEO or top management team is lengthy. Boeker (1997) also cited data to support that lack of diversity in tenure can present similar difficulties with implementing change. McGill, Slocum, and Lei (1992) maintained that generative learning can only become rooted when management is open to the dimensions of (a) openness versus a need for control, (b) systems thinking and a commitment to understanding significant interrelationships of important

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<sup>20</sup> Use *and* instead of & when the citation is integrated into the sentence—that is, when it is not within the parentheses.

issues, (c) creativity and a willingness to take calculated risks, (d) a sense of accountability for learning, and (e) empathy and a concern for relationships with coworkers.

When an organization determines to embrace organizational learning and to develop it as a competency, a phased plan must be established. The plan should include baseline and periodic measurements of organizational readiness, training and facilitation, recognition and reward incentives, clear roles and accountability, and a plan for removing obstacles to implementation of the initiative. One of the most significant detractors to a learning initiative can be management's failure to understand and remove the obstacles that prevent learning (Torres & Preskill, 2001). To enable a short-term win, Argyris (1993) suggested selecting a specific issue that requires immediate action and improvement. The issue should be easily defined and small in scope, a topic that the organization is skilled to address and one that can yield measurable progress in a relatively short time period. Gaining confidence and momentum are crucial in the early phases of implementation. Setting formidable goals with little or no skill to achieve the intended outcome will reinitiate defensive routines and erode support for the learning initiative.

Recognizing the importance of shared tacit knowledge, the executive team should revisit the organizational structure and work processes to ensure that there are no unintended barriers to fluid communication. Identifying sources of external knowledge and assigning roles for internal dissemination of information are important in support of more productive strategic planning. Change may feel unsettling and unnatural to the workforce. Assigning roles and accountability for data collection, interpretation, and dissemination reinforces the new practice until it becomes more automatic. A signpost of continual learning is actionable metrics. When the organization seeks to implement learning for sustained change, the management team needs to measure

progress. Measuring an intangible such as learning is difficult. The team must find a way to convert learning to practices that result in measurable outcomes.

### Measurement Tools

There are two important measures of learning in an organization—cultural readiness and outcomes. Cultural readiness studies the organization’s skill level and openness to the active pursuit of learning. The executive team must assess the readiness level prior to implementing a learning initiative and continue to monitor the organization in order to sustain the initiative.

Campbell and Cairns (1994) presented a measurement tool for assessing and tracking learning readiness. The behaviorally anchored rating scales (BARS) was developed to measure learning readiness according to eight behaviors: (a) communication, (b) learning and innovation, (c) strategic thinking, (d) information gathering and processing, (e) decision making, (f) change management, (g) measurement capability, and (h) rewards and recognition practices (p. 12).<sup>21</sup>

Campbell and Cairns<sup>22</sup> maintained that these attributes reflect the organizational culture’s attitude toward learning, identifying gaps and measuring learning progress. Establishing a baseline reading and tracking improvement in these areas should accompany the learning initiative. Feedback to the organization regarding the learning metrics serves as incentive to the employees to continue the initiative. Tying learning progress to more tangible measures of company success is the second important motivator for an organization.

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<sup>21</sup> Only the page number is cited here because the work is previously cited in this paragraph and there is no other intervening citation.

<sup>22</sup> Once you have cited the year of a work in a paragraph, you do not have to repeat the year in that paragraph, unless the citation is entirely parenthetical (APA, 6th ed., p. 174).

Commercial organizations typically measure progress with financial indicators such as profit margin, return on investment, cash flow, or sales. Measuring learning is more difficult because conversion to a financial measure may incur a significant lag time. Market dynamism represents one measure that can reveal changes in the learning process. Market dynamism captures changes in the organization's product mix and in strategies for product pricing, advertising, and promotions (Sinkula et al., 1997). A firm that has not implemented changes in these categories on a regular basis may be able to track the effect of environmental scanning on marketing strategy using these metrics. A caution is that changes in these areas may not be the direct result of learning; understanding the driver behind the changes (for example, new processes for collecting and sharing market information) is important for validating the direct influence of organizational learning to the strategic planning process.

Kaplan and Norton (2005) discussed the use of tools such as the balanced scorecard for tracking the effects of organizational learning. The concept behind a balanced set of measures is tracking metrics that address financial, customer, operational, and innovation and learning perspectives. As the authors pointed out, this approach allows the executive team to see the progress from multiple points of view and to determine if success in one area is offset by the degradation of another area. Ideally, prospective measures and goals are established in each of the four areas. Learning can be tracked in each area if the management team understands how learning is actively applied toward the measures. For example, levels for acceptable versus poor performance must be established for profit margins, sales, product quality, and customer satisfaction. Specific learning measures would be implemented in each of these areas and subsequent measurements taken to track progress against goals. A tangible example is product



nonconformance as indicated by first-pass yield in manufacturing. Assuming that root causes can be established for each nonconformance and that effective corrective and preventive actions subsequently can be implemented, the same nonconformances should decline as the reasons for manufacturing yield failures. This type of specific reduction can be traced to learning that becomes part of the manufacturing procedures and daily operations of the firm. Vague or overly general measurements are difficult to trace to learning since other variables may be driving a measurable change. In order to sustain generative learning, new goals or metrics must be established once the original targets are achieved. In essence, the metrics themselves must be generative.

### **Conclusion<sup>23</sup>**

Despite more than a decade of literature on the benefits of organizational learning, many firms have yet to realize its potential to improve customer satisfaction, product quality, employee growth, and achievement of financial and strategic goals. Collecting and managing knowledge may still be regarded as a superfluous activity, yet it is critical to an organization's ability to maintain a competitive posture and retain talented employees.

Single-loop learning is effective as an immediate corrective mechanism, but it fails to ensure the continual improvement that yields more effective processes, new product innovation, and market growth. Double-loop learning establishes the environment for iterative learning that continuously challenges assumptions, theories in use, and traditional practices. Senge (1990) maintained that the opportunity to survive and prosper is governed by the ability to learn and implement improvement at a faster rate than one's competitor. Learning can be applied to

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<sup>23</sup> Level 1 heading.

technology, work processes, product quality, and strategic planning. A firm that engages in limited environmental scanning may need to learn to learn and simultaneously implement new strategic skills. Rowland and Smith (2001) provided the case study of a firm that reaped the benefits of organizational learning to change thought patterns and strategic goals. Strategic goals are not limited to revenue and marketing plans; a strategic plan should also include targets for customer satisfaction, product quality, technical innovation, and process effectiveness.

Addressing the issue of ineffective strategic decisions, Shimizu and Hitt (2004) cited the problem of organizational inflexibility. Rather than remain attached to ineffective heuristics, the executive team must learn new ways to address issues and be willing to acknowledge and reverse mistakes. Eliminating blame from the retrospective analysis and placing focus on learning from past mistakes can strengthen the team's ability to process new information from the external environment. When the team is preoccupied with avoiding blame, the defensive routines emerge and heuristics reengage to limit learning.

Making the decision to pursue learning is the academic portion of the exercise. A successful implementation resulting in measurable and sustained improvement is the more difficult task. The executive team must understand the various types of knowledge; ascertain the readiness of the organization to make the change; provide for the collection, storage, and dissemination of the knowledge; set specific goals; establish a supportive organizational structure; assign accountability; and create a system to measure progress. Accountability and commitment for the endeavor start at the executive level and are probably best achieved through a permanent team charged with overseeing the effort. Creating a learning organization is hard

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work and a lifelong effort for the firm. After all, the intent of learning is continuous progress—not a one-time event or program.

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<sup>25</sup> The first line of each reference entry should be flush left and subsequent lines should be indented five spaces. Double-space the entire reference list.

<sup>26</sup> Italicize the volume number but not the issue number. APA does not require inclusion of the issue number if each issue is paginated sequentially; however, the issue number is required if each issue begins with page 1. Most faculty members prefer the inclusion of issue numbers regardless of this rule, but some prefer to stick to the technical rule.

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