A Genre–based Study of Case Response Writing on an MBA Programme

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Abstract

Case-based assignments represent a common form of assessment on academic business programmes (Easton 1982 and Mauffette-Leenders, Erskine and Leenders 1997), with students required to generate amongst other responses, business case reports, case critiques and case analyses (Nathan 2013). Only limited research is available to support academic writing tutors in understanding such case response texts with published studies focusing solely on business case reports (Freedman and Adam 1994, Forman and Rymer 1999a, 1999b and Nathan 2013). In order to aid writing tutors in supporting academic business students, this paper presents a small corpus study of 36 case response non-report texts (ca. 40000 words), generated on a UK MBA programme. These texts represent categories designated case critique, case advisory and case comparison texts, and were written in three business specialisms, Marketing, Human Resource Management, and Finance, respectively. Rhetorical analysis identified variable rhetorical structure dependent on text category, although orientation, analytical and conclusion components were present at high frequency in all text categories. Substantial variability in citation frequencies, modal verb, business lexis, and first person pronoun deployment was also identified between text categories. Awareness of both similarities and differences in case-based writing responses should serve as a useful aid in informing academic writing pedagogy.

1. Introduction

Business and management represent study areas of key importance in university higher education both within Europe and worldwide. While no statistics specifically stating the numbers of students on business and management degrees in Europe were identified during this research, for 2011, Eurostat (2015) identified more than 6 million European students involved in degree programmes in business, social science and law. In 2013-2014, there were more than 300,000 students studying Business and Administration in the UK alone (HESA 2015), of whom, approximately 40% were international students (UKCISA 2015), with the trend being towards increasing numbers of students taking degree programmes in these areas.

Within these business and management programmes, English is a major language through which these courses are studied. Beyond the UK, USA, Australia and other major English speaking countries, there are increasing numbers of business degree programmes in Europe and the rest of the world where English is the medium of study, with English of particular prevalence as the language of study in postgraduate and more specifically MBA programmes.

In line with its use as a medium of study, English is the language of assessment on these programmes, often requiring students to engage in extended writing in continuous assessment and examination tasks. While systematic study of European and worldwide institutions in terms of business degree programme assessment, texts and tasks has not been reported, within the context of MBA and other degree programmes within the UK and USA and other countries, written assessments have been found to be conducted through a variety of different forms of assignments ranging from

essays to critiques, from case-based assignments to business reports, from research proposals to research reports, amongst other academic writing tasks (Horowitz 1986, Cooper and Bikowski 2007 and Nesi and Gardner 2012).

One of the key modes of assessment on these business programmes requires students to engage in written responses to business cases. These responses may take a range of forms from case reports to case critiques, and short answer questions (Nathan 2013). Business case reports, sometimes referred to as simply case studies or case analyses, have been the subject of several studies, for example by Forman and Rymer (1999a and 1999b), Freedman, Adam and Smart (1994), Freedman and Adam (1996) and Nathan (2013). However, other forms of extended response to business cases have not as yet been the subject of published research.

In order to provide bases for further supporting tutors in their teaching of academic business writing and to support business students with their academic writing challenges, the current paper presents a small-scale study of some additional categories of written case response texts identified on a postgraduate business programme. The classes of text investigated are identified as case comparison, case critique, and case advisory genres. These texts were subject to rhetorical analysis within a genre-based framework and microlinguistic analysis focusing on citation form and frequency, lexis, personal pronoun usage, modal verb deployment, citation form and frequency, amongst other rhetorical features. The language features of these texts are compared with the features of business case reports.

2. Business case teaching

Business cases are widely used as a medium for teaching, learning, and assessment on academic business programmes (Easton 1992, Russell 2002 and Nesi and Gardner 2012). These cases usually comprise extended texts based in real business situations and business practice in which the actions of a business or business managers are presented along with descriptions of the background to the business, the characteristics of the business itself as well as financial data, company performance and market data. The precise data presented is to some extent dependent on the disciplinary area in which the case is used for teaching and learning.

Students may respond to these case texts verbally and in written form, for example in regard to the former, through classroom discussion, or through presentations providing solutions to problems arising in the case or with regard to written texts, through case reports, case critiques and case analyses (Nathan 2013). In the university programme examined in Nathan's study, business case reports were either produced as continuous assessment texts written over a period of several weeks or were texts written in seen examinations where case materials (but not the precise written tasks) are provided prior to the examination. Theoretical background and business principles underpinning responses were taught in lectures and seminars during the programme.

3. Written case responses

Research in the linguistics literature in regard to written case responses has focused on business case reports, also termed case write-ups (Forman and Rymer 1999a and 1999b) and case studies (Freedman and Adam 1996). Nathan (2013) defines business case reports as texts in which the student writer adopts a simulated role, for example as a manager or business consultant, writing for a simulated audience using business tools and frameworks in order to generate 'action-focused' reports. Nathan also reports an additional two categories of written case response text, namely (1) case analyses within which learners are required to analyse a case, and identify the crucial factors influencing events and actions in a case, and (2) case critiques within which learners are required to evaluate the actions and strategies of a business or business manager usually with reference to the business research literature and theoretical business principles. The making of recommendations or the suggestions of alternative solutions can appear in both of these types of text.

Within the context of business case reports, Freedman, Adam and Smart (1994) set out to address the question of whether the writing of case reports on postgraduate business programmes provides useful preparation for the writing of workplace business reports. In their university business school

case reports, it was observed that the students in this study were required to adopt roles as management consultants in their case report writing tasks. Interestingly, analysis through interview showed that many student writers saw the key audience as being the university tutor or lecturer. Purposes of the university-based business case report texts were concluded to be substantially different from those of workplace texts, raising questions over the value of university case reports as preparation for workplace writing. In this research on the relationship between workplace and pedagogical case report writing, the postgraduate business case reports were found to be explicitly structured, containing sections including executive summary, recommendations, analytical components and appendices.

In their study of business case reports, Forman and Rymer (1999) found student writers struggling with the need to marry the consultant and professional advisory simulation role required of them in their task rubrics with the 'real' epistemic purpose of their writing. These researchers, as with the research by Freedman's group, identified analytical and recommendations components in the case report texts studied. However, by contrast, these researchers did not identify executive summaries and appendices. This was most likely because, in this setting, students generated texts which were a maximum of a single page in length whereas in the Freedman group studies, texts were variable in length up to a maximum of 40 sides. Forman and Rymer identified a number of explicit moves in their case report texts including problem identification, proposal and analysis of alternative solutions, as well as recommendations and also identified several implicit moves, namely adopting a management stance, offering a point of view and acting as a blunt and decisive consultant.

In a genre-based study conducted in order to support students in the writing of business case reports, Nathan (2013) examined sixty-nine business cases originating from differing business specialisms and written as both continuous assessment and examination texts. These reports were found to vary in length with continuous assessment reports averaging approximately 3000 words in length and examination texts around 2000 words. Seven core moves were identified in these case reports, three obligatory, namely orientation, analytical and advisory moves, and four optional moves, namely methodology, summary and consolidation, supplementary supporting information and reflection, the latter move only being found in undergraduate texts. These moves were realised through a range of different structural components, the deployment of which was dependent on the business specialism. Texts were characterised by explicit structure, impersonal writing and business specialism-dependent lexis.

4. The research context

The research context for this study was a postgraduate MBA programme at a leading UK Business School. Students on the programme tended to be mature students and were required to have several years of management experience to gain entry to the programme amongst other qualifications. The students were a mix of home and non-native speaker international students with the majority of international students originating from China. A significant majority of students on the programme were males. The course programme required students to take a wide range of core modules at the beginning of their programmes with a range of optional modules being introduced later on. A high level of English language was required for entry to the programme with non-native speaker students required to achieve an overall IELTS score of 7.0 or equivalent English language qualification.

5. Methodology

5.1 The corpus
Analysis of the case responses written on the MBA programme in this study[1] led to the identification of three different forms of case response text which had not previously been subject to substantive linguistic study. Two of these types, the case critique and case analysis text categories, have previously been reported in the pedagogical case writing literature (Nathan 2013). A further category

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[1] All students whose work was included in this study completed ethics forms giving permission for use of their writing samples in this research.

was identified comprising a case comparison category of text. Tasks undertaken are detailed in Table 1 along with proposed communicative purposes for each text category. Notably, in comparison to case report tasks, there was no requirement for adoption of a role as manager or consultant in these tasks.

Table 1. Case writing tasks in the study

Business specialism	Genre category	Broad Communicative purpose(s)	Task
HRM	Case advisory task	Demonstrate knowledge, understanding and the capacity to apply HRM business theory to a practical context, producing logical and justified recommendations for courses of action.	Advise Boris on how he should respond to the situation he finds himself in. In advising Boris you should draw on the information from your [HRM] course.
Marketing	Case critique	Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of marketing tools and principles, as well as the ability to evaluate a marketing strategy based in these marketing principles [and identify factors contributing to success].	Critically evaluate the marketing strategy introduced by the National Bicycle Industrial Company. To what extent can the firm's success be said to be driven by a clear understanding of the firm's critical success factors?
Finance	Case comparison	Demonstrate knowledge, understanding of, and the ability to apply core financial tools to compare the business positions of different companies.	Using one or more competitors for benchmarking, compare the financial performance of your project company with these competitors.

Details of the corpus composition are presented in Table 2. All sample texts were written in timed examination conditions with case data provided or, in the context of the finance examination, generated by students, prior to the examination. The sample texts arose from different business specialisms; the case comparison texts from a finance-related module; the advisory genre arose in a module focused on human resource management; while the case critique arose from a marketing module. All texts included within the corpus achieved marks of 60% or more, this level being chosen for analysis as such texts were considered more likely to contain features of strong and acceptable writing (BAWE 2008).

Table 2. Corpus composition

Business Specialism	Texts	Total words	Average text length	Minimum length	Maximum length	SD	Context
HRM	12	14210	1184	713	1443	288	Exam
Marketing	12	10711	893	617	1237	196	Exam
Finance	12	14519	1210	800	2180	411	Exam

5.2 Genre analysis

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used for analysis of texts in the study. Broad structural features comprising case response moves were identified using qualitative interpretive analysis of the texts within each case response sub-corpus. Based on task and contextual features, communicative purposes for each text category were proposed (see Table 1) in a manner following the approach of Askehave and Swales (2001). Broad rhetorical moves were allocated to text components based in these communicative purposes.

Citation frequencies were counted directly. Wordsmith Tools 6.0 was used to analyse the frequencies of specific language components, in particular, modal verb, hedges and boosters, business-related nouns and personal pronoun usage frequencies, while qualitative and frequency analysis was applied in order to determine the functions supported by specific language components.

6. Results

6.1 Rhetorical move structures in case response texts
Table 3 shows a comparison of the identified structural features of the texts in each of the different text categories. Each of the genre categories identified generally comprised orientation moves usually in the form of introductions (though these were not always present), and ended with a summary and consolidation move (where these were titled, they were identified as conclusions), found in 67% Finance, 75% HRM texts and 50% of marketing texts).

Table 3. Broad rhetorical move structures of case responses

| HRM case advisory | | Marketing case critique | Finance case comparison |
Model A	Model B		
Orientation	Orientation	Orientation	Orientation
Analysis	Analysis/recommendations by topic:	Analysis and evaluation by topic:	Comparative analysis by topic:
	Topic A	Topic A	Topic A
	Topic B	Topic B	Topic B
Recommendations	Topic C…	Topic C…	Topic C…
Conclusion	Conclusion	Conclusion	Conclusion

Analytical components were identified in each of the genres though these occurred in different forms. For example, the comparative genre provided a topic-by-topic comparative analysis, while the case critical evaluation involved identification of elements of company strategy in the case (identification being seen as involving analysis) accompanied by evaluative comment in relation to the identified strategy. Both comparative and case critique genres operated in a topic-based manner. In the case advisory genre, however, two patterns were identified, firstly a cyclic topic-based analysis-recommendation pattern found in 43% of samples and secondly an analysis text component followed by a recommendation component identified in 50% of samples[2].

These move structures are somewhat less complex than the move structure presented for business case reports (Nathan 2013). However, the published case report move structure is a consolidated structure encompassing the range of possibilities identifiable in all case reports, including lengthy continuous assessment assignments which, for example, incorporated optional elements such as appendices, reflection, and methodology, elements not identified in exam written business case report texts in the 2013 study. The obligatory orientation, analysis and advisory-recommendation moves identified in the business case reports in this 2013 study parallel the structure adopted in 50% of the HRM case advisory texts.

[2] One text incorporated both patterns.

6.2 Citation frequency

While citation is almost universally portrayed as a common and frequent requirement for academic writing, Nathan (2013) found that while there was significant citation in undergraduate case reports in several business specialisms, by contrast, postgraduate business case reports from marketing and management were low in citation with many of the reports analysed, both continuous assessment and examination, showing no citation at all.

In the three case-based genres examined in this study, in which texts were also written by postgraduate students, citation frequencies varied substantially. In the twelve case comparison texts written in the Finance specialism, only one citation was identified. In the case critique marketing texts, seven citations were identified in four of the texts with no citation in the remaining eight texts. By contrast, in the HRM advisory text sixty-nine citations were identified, found in ten of the twelve texts.

Clearly there is some noteworthy variation in the requirement for citation in the different text categories. Rather than being grounded in the specific nature of the task, genre and response, this variability in citation frequencies is considered to be accounted for by the relevant business specialisms and their use of standard analytical tools which are not conventionally cited (for example, in the finance texts use of analytical tools and frameworks such as working capital, ROI (return on investment) and profitability). As in the previous study on business case reports, all citations identified followed the Harvard citation system.

Rather than focusing on the literature as a source of information, in both the marketing and finance case genres there was noticeable reference to information in the case itself, with the reader referred to figures, tables, and diagrams in the case materials. By contrast, however, the HRM-focused texts contained lower levels of such case references, with an apparently greater assumption of the lecturer's knowledge of the case.

6.3 Personal pronouns usage

For the most part, the three business case genres tended to be impersonal in style. Nevertheless personal pronoun usage was identified in these texts (Table 4). The first person pronoun 'I' was identified in seven of the twelve HRM specialism texts (1.6 uses per thousand words) and eight of the twelve marketing texts (2.1 uses per thousand words). Plural first person pronouns were present in five finance, eight HRM and five marketing texts. While relatively high total count frequencies of plural first person pronouns were identified in finance texts, summative figures were distorted by the data from a single user. Similarly, the relatively high total use of 'you' (0.27 uses per thousand words) in the HRM texts was accounted for by 93% of uses (25 of 27 uses) found in a single text sample.

Personal pronouns were identified as performing a range of functions in the different case responses, including those of giving advice (I would advise…, I would recommend…, I would support Boris to…), stating author processes, strategy, goals (I will highlight…, I will briefly mention…, I will compare…, I have included…), and giving personal interpretations (We believe that…, I feel that…, I understand that…).

All uses of 'I' in these cases refer to the student writer. However, the first personal plural pronoun 'we' was used to refer to 'we' as the company (we are equally efficient…), 'we' as the writers generating the report (we intend to…), and also as inclusive 'we' (we should also note that…, if we consider the Johari window…, as we can see…, we are informed…). In the HRM and marketing texts, almost all uses are inclusive, while in the finance texts, almost all uses represent 'we' as the company.

Compared to the previously analysed case reports (Nathan 2013) where personal pronouns were found at much higher levels in postgraduate compared to undergraduate texts, both the HRM and marketing case response texts showed higher levels of first person 'I' usage in comparison to the case reports, with these two genres showing lower levels of 'we' usage.

Table 4. Key personal pronoun frequencies in the case response texts (raw/frequency/occurrences per thousand words)

Personal Pronoun[3]	HRM Case Advisory	Marketing Case Critique	Finance Case Comparison
I	22 (0.16)	23 (0.21)	6 (0.04)
my	5 (0.04)	3 (0.03)	0
you	27 (0.20)	2	3 (0.02)
your	18 (0.14)	1	0
we	23 (0.17)	8 (0.07)	82 (0.53)
us	6 (0.04)	3 (0.03)	14 (010)
our	2 (0.01)	1	92 (0.59)
ourselves	0	0	3 (0.02)

High levels of 'we' usage in studied marketing business case reports were identified as attributable to the more explicit adoption by NNS writers of a role specified in a case report task rubric. No such role adoption was required in any of the tasks used in the current study.

6.4 Modal verb deployment

Overall, the level of modal verbs observed was notably higher in the HRM advisory texts (Table 5), this being accounted for by the need for provision of advice in these texts mediated through the relatively high frequency of the advisory modal verb 'should'. Also linked to the function of advice giving in these advisory texts is the relatively high level of occurrences of the modal verbs 'will' and 'would'.

Table 5. Modal verb frequencies in the case response texts (raw frequency/occurrences per thousand words)

Modal verb	HRM case advisory	Marketing case critique	Finance case comparison
can	49 (0.33)	46 (0.41)	50 (0.32)
could	40 (0.27)	22 (0.20)	19 (0.12)
have to	5 (0.04)	4 (0.04)	2 (0.01)
may	20 (0.14)	12 (0.11)	27 (0.17)
might	17 (0.12)	6 (0.05)	2 (0.01)
must	10 (0.07)	4 (0.04)	10 (0.06)
should	91 (0.63)	18 (0.06)	21 (0.14)
will	76 (0.53)	28 (0.28)	48 (0.31)
would	41 (0.29)	17 (0.16)	9 (0.04)
total	349 (2.42)	157 (1.35)	188 (1.23)

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[3] Pronouns not included in the table (e.g. me, myself, yourself) were not identified in the texts.

These modal verbs tended to be deployed either as statements of, in the case of 'will', strong advice, as in for example:

Boris will have to generate a monetary reward in order to…enhance performance.

(sample HRCLQS71)

Goal setting will be advisable.

(sample HRCLQS570)

or for the prediction of consequences of actions:

Public backing from Pierre will instantly improve the perception of Boris's plans in his team's eyes.

(sample HRCLQS175)

Collaboration in forming the vision and strategy planning will be helpful in setting up a powerful framework for change.[4]

(sample HRCLQS773)

The modal 'would' is largely used for the prediction of consequences, in a manner similar to 'will', providing greater emphasis on the hypotheticality of the proposed action or to somewhat hedge and mitigate advisory statements as in,

I would advise Boris to articulate his goal and vision about the company clearly.

(sample HRLCQ1S570)

I would advise him that he take the team away…

(sample HRCLQ1S671)

Keyword analysis indicates statistically significant higher levels of deployment of 'should', and 'would' in HRM advisory texts compared to Finance texts (G^2 = 51.81, 32.04 respectively) and in HRM texts compared to the marketing texts (G^2=34.01, 4.78) respectively, at $p<0.05$.

6.5 Hedges and boosters While all the case response texts showed comparable levels of hedges, when modal verbs were excluded from the count, boosters were found at higher levels in the HRM texts (Tables 6 and 7). This is again seen as, most likely, linked to the advisory purpose of these texts, this function embodying a high level of commitment to proposed actions. Inclusion of relevant modal verbs into the count increased these differences in levels with substantially higher levels of boosters observed in the HRM case advisory genre. The data for the finance case comparison and the marketing critique reflects the previously reported business case reports data with hedges occurring at higher levels than boosters.

Table 6. Hedges and boosters frequencies (excluding modal verbs) in the case response texts (raw frequency/occurrences per thousand words)

	HRM case advisory	Marketing case critique	Finance case comparison
Hedges	78 (0.54)	55 (0.50)	101 (0.65)
Boosters	67 (0.46)	29 (0.26)	40 (0.25)

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[4] This statement is evaluative and can be seen as providing a recommendation at the same time.

Table 7. Hedges and boosters frequencies (including modal verbs) in the case response texts (raw frequency/occurrences per thousand words)

	HRM case advisory	Marketing case critique	Finance case comparison
Hedges	201 (1.39)	112 (1.02)	148 (0.99)
Boosters	262 (1.82)	73 (0.68)	121 (0.77)

6.6 Lexis Table 8 shows the top ten most frequent business-related lexical items in the different case genre texts. The business specialisms show major differences in this core business related vocabulary with 'company' and 'market' being the only lexical items appearing in more than one list. Otherwise, all top ten lexical items are different, indicating the substantially differing concerns of the specialisms. This data mirrors the marked differences in lexis identified in business case reports from different business specialisms.

Table 8. Most frequent business lexis in the case response texts (raw frequency/ occurrences per thousand words)

HRM case advisory	Marketing case critique	Finance case comparison
Culture 137 (0.95)	Market 95 (0.87)	Company 78 (0.50)
Team 81 (0.56)	Customer 94 (0.86)	Financial 74 (0.48)
Company 69 (0.48)	Product 85 (0.78)	Market 62 (0.40)
Communication 67 (0.47)	Marketing 80 (0.73)	Performance 57 (0.37)
Managers 48 (0.33)	Mass 76 (0.69)	Share 56 (0.36)
Organisation 47 (0.33)	Customers 73 (0.67)	Business 54 (0.35)
Organisational 45 (0.31)	Strategy 73 (0.67)	Ratio 53 (0.34)
Work 34 (0.24)	Brand 53 (0.48)	Operating 52 (0.34)
Vision 31 (0.22)	Quality 42 (0.38)	Companies 45 (0.29)
Employees 30 (0.21)	Price 41 (0.37)	Profit 44 (0.28)

In addition to the identification of the modal verbs 'should'*,* 'will' and 'would' as key words on text comparison, analysis identified a wide range of statistically significant lexical differences between the text categories. In particular, the word 'change' used as either a verb or noun was found at much higher frequency in HRM texts compared to Finance texts (G^2 = 142.13) and Marketing texts (G^2 = 114) at $p<0.00001$. Clearly the advisory function is linked to the promotion of change in the advisory case task. Unsurprisingly, the word 'comparison' was identified as a key word present in the Finance texts when lexical frequency comparison was made with both HRM texts as was 'compared' when comparing with the marketing texts ($p<00001$).

7. Discussion

This study has presented a linguistic analysis of three types of written responses to business cases, a case critique, a case advisory genre and a case comparison genre written in the business specialisms of marketing, HRM and finance. Rhetorical analysis has suggested some differing and some shared rhetorical features between the genre categories, with orientation moves, analytical and summary and consolidation moves, present in all categories. Unsurprisingly, the advisory genre contains an advisory move (recommendation move). These move features demonstrate overlap with the core and other business case report rhetorical moves described by Nathan (2013).

More micro-linguistic analysis indicates substantial differences in business related lexis, most likely founded in the particular business specialism. Citation frequencies were low in the marketing critique with citations almost non-existent in the finance case comparison, while these frequencies were substantially higher in the HRM-related texts. While texts were generally impersonal in character, first person pronouns were present at low frequencies in many samples and were associated with provision of advice, stating author strategies and goals, and giving personal interpretations. The plural first person pronoun 'we' was generally inclusive in meaning in the marketing and HRM cases, but generally referred to the case company in the finance texts. Modal verbs occurred at higher frequency largely due to the prevalence of 'should*'* as an advisory modal and 'will' and 'would', providing for the

former, strong advice and for the latter the mitigation of advisory comments. Largely due to the frequencies of the modal verbs, 'will', 'would' and 'should', hedges and boosters occurred overall at higher frequencies in the HRM texts.

This study is limited due to the corpus size, with a total of only 36 texts examined, 12 from each business specialism and genre, and with the text responses in each category based in single tasks. Thus, while this study does provide information regarding the nature of written case responses, there is a requirement for study of a much larger number of additional texts in these categories to add evidence with regard to genre move structure and other linguistic features, and also to address questions such as, for example, whether specific genres and tasks can be associated with the different business specialisms and whether specific genre structures will vary with specialism.

Overall, this paper has demonstrated substantial variability but also some similarities in both the structural and more micro-linguistic features of the written responses to business cases examined in this study. Nevertheless, given the observed variability in pedagogical business writing, the variability identified in Nathan's (2013) study of business case reports, together with the likelihood of identifying additional variability in other business specialisms and contexts, it would seem likely to be of benefit for those tutors supporting business students to develop awareness and understanding of the particular tasks as well as the nature and characteristics of the case responses required in their specific academic business contexts.

Understanding and awareness of structural move features in these genres can be supported through, for example, the presentation and analysis of model case response texts linked to discussion of the rhetorical move structures presented in this paper. Case response model texts derived from specific study contexts can prove a startpoint for discussion of the use of modal verbs, personal pronouns, hedges and boosters and other linguistic features in these case response texts. Supporting such teaching and presentation of case response linguistic features, and supporting the analysis of case response writing in these varied contexts, the case response analysis presented in this paper provides structural models and a range of other linguistic evidence to underpin this analysis of case responses and should enable academic business writing tutors to more effectively support the case response writing of their business students.

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