

Self-promotion in job application letters: Moves, rhetorical pattern, ideational content, and linguistic features

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Abstract - *This study is about self-promotion lines found in job application letters. Moves are determined, hand-tagged, and analyzed guided by Swales' (1990) notion of moves. The writers mutually share five-part structural description of a job application letter - greetings, intention, educational qualification, working experiences, and gratitude. In addition, self-promotion lines were explored in the text and writer have two approaches - deductive and inductive. Results suggest that rhetorical patterns of writers' self-promotion lines can potentially strengthen (or weaken) their profile. In terms of ideational content and linguistic repertoires, self-promotion in job application letters of the writers are interestingly not matching because writers appear confident and straightforward in presenting their qualifications but utilized the language indicative of weak modal and mental verbs. Implications to teaching business writing and shedding light to cultural and social factors in writing are discussed towards the end of the study.*

Keywords: *rhetorical pattern, moves, self-promotion*

INTRODUCTION

Even in the age of digital technology, business writing skills is still demanded by potential employers. Effective communication of the writer's intention, educational qualification, skills and training, and work experiences is usually imperative to succeed in its purpose. Several researchers have focused on genre analysis, contrastive rhetoric, and discourse analysis and they examined several media texts such as research articles [1] dissertation acknowledgement and private letters [2] letters to the editor [3] and others analyzed sales promotion letters [4]; tourism brochures [5] and still others analyzed scam business emails [6]. Researchers examined structural moves, strategies, linguistic resources, and politeness levels [7], [8]. In the current study, the researcher examined and described the writers' self-promotion by hand-tagging the move.

The writer's main communicative goal in a job application letter is to convince potential employer (by stating in the letter his or her personal and professional capabilities). In social psychology, the term "self-presentation" refers to the behavior of an individual who attempts to convey information about oneself to other people. Jones & Pittman [9] explain that the term self-presentation needs a framework in order to understand its ubiquitous meaning. They present a

taxonomy of strategies displayed by self-presentation of an individual. The point that they made was that we lead others to believe in something we possess (e.g., talent and skills) [10]. Baumeister, Tice, and Hutton [11] posit that self-presentation behavior is rooted from an individual's motivation. This motivation is elicited depending on situational factors such as the evaluative presence of other people and by knowledge of one's behavior. In the current study, writers convey their personal and professional capacities and skills in their job application letter and one of the self-presentation strategies is "self-promotion". According to Jones & Pittman, self-promotion is convincing people of one's competence, intelligence and talent. The motivation of the writers in eliciting details to promote themselves is investigated by examining the patterns or moves of their self-promotion. As Kaplan's [12],[13] cultural thought patterns suggest, individuals have varied ways to present their thoughts in writing and attributing factors such as culture, beliefs and values are commonly invoked. Writers in the current study have unique thought patterns or moves in delivering their self-promotion statements. Results could be significant to research because it adds to the extant literatures about delivering self-promotion among adult L2 writers and the process they go through as they promote themselves to others in a job application letter. Results

of the current study have implications to teaching business communication and underpins success (or failure) to effective written communication. Second, it adds to the literatures of self-promotion and moves; and underscores writers' cultural thought patterns in promoting themselves in an application letter.

Swales [14] notion of moves is cited by Muangsamai [15] who examined and analyzed regularity (or irregularity) of text. Genre according to Swales is a form of discourse with shared structure, style, content, and intended audience and it is used by a specific discourse community to achieve certain purpose. Halliday's notion of theme and rheme in the paper of Cheung [16] was used to analyze ideational content of sales promotion letters. Still some other paper about persuasion strategies found in Greek application letters [17] cited 23 persuasion appeals of Conner & Later [18] who claim that these appeals have logical categories (i.e., rational, affective, and logical). Writing a job application letter reveals the thoughts and attitudes of a writer. Extant literatures mention politeness levels, language competence, and cultural thought patterns unique to individuals. Sapir-Worf hypothesis contends that language shapes or controls the thinking of an individual, one with distinct or unique view of the world. In other words, culture plays a pivotal role in the choices of language and patterns of thoughts of an individual. In the current study, language used by the writers to "self-promote" reveals their culture, competence, and local discourse practices.

While the terms self-promotion (SP) and self-presentation (SP) are more likely linked to social behavior studies than applied linguistic or psychology, the current study examines the linguistic resources and moves of the writers' SP. The investigation is premised on the idea that L2 writing is cultural, hence the thought pattern that is used to SP should also be manifested in the job application letter. The following research objectives are sought in the current study:

1. To determine the moves mutually shared by the writers and describe the moves in terms of self-promotion strategies; and
2. To describe the self-promotion lines in terms of structural moves in the paragraph, ideational content, and linguistic properties.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This is a genre-based study using mix method design both to quantify and qualify collated corpus or data. Swales [12] defines move as a functional unit

with a specific communicative purpose. The moves in each paragraph are coded as **M**. Opening lines of each paragraph are moves. For example, **M1** means move 1. Each move is labelled as to greetings, intention, educational qualification, working experiences, gratitude.

The application letters came from the HR (Human Resource) office which the researcher has requested. More than 50 letters were granted but only 45 application letters were chosen for this study. Some of the applications do not contain cover letters and some were duplicates and so, were removed. The writers of these letters were all applicants since 2015-2017 either for a teaching and non-teaching position. Nineteen (19) are females and 26 are males. Their ages range from 20-42.

Ethical Consideration. Any information about the writer's residence, university or office are withheld to protect and maintain the anonymity of the writer.

Data Gathering Procedure

Moves or Essential Components of a Business Letter. The researcher read each application letter and numbered each paragraph. Opening line of each paragraph was studied and tagged as to greetings, intention, educational qualification (EQ), work experiences (WE), gratitude, skills, and training. Generally, opening line of a paragraph contains a single sentence. However, there were also opening lines containing two clauses. In this case, the opening line is tagged **M1** educational qualification (EQ), training. This means that a writer mentions his educational qualification and training in one sentence.

Self-promotion (SP) lines. In order for the researcher to locate the SP of the writer, the researcher focused on the move - in particular the EQ, WE, skills, and training. The researcher collated all the lines containing these moves. For example, **AL25 M1**, means application letter number 25 contains Move 1 as **EQ** or educational qualification.

[AL25] **M1** *I obtained the degree in..* (educational qualification)

M2 *I believe I am qualified.* (self-promotion)

Data Analysis

Moves or Essential Components of a Business Letter. The moves were subjected to a validation process. The researcher developed a survey questionnaire with a three-point Likert scale. Three English faculty were invited to rate the moves and

corresponding strategies. For example, Greetings (strategy - build rapport with the reader). Validators' ratings were tabulated in a frequency table and computed in terms of average or mean scores. The mean score of the validators is 2.05 which means agree. However, they disagreed (0.52) to some moves and strategies in particular, for example, gratitude (Thank you and Godspeed!). Another example is the move, intention (I have the honor to apply for the vacant position in your good office). The researcher described the strategy as containing trite or formulaic expressions. Validator 2 somehow agreed and wrote in the comment grid that it could be that the writer extends his sincerest intention.

Self-promotion (SP) lines in terms of position in the paragraph. SP lines were analyzed based on the definition of Jones & Pittman which states that individuals lead other people to believe they possess the qualities or characteristics. The researcher primarily focused on the writers' moves - EQ, WE, skills, and training. Afterwards, the researcher utilized critical reading and introspection of lines before and after moves coded as EQ, WE, skills, and training. Then, the line is coded as SP or self-promotion. For example:

[AL31] **M1** (sample text extract) EQ
M2 (sample text extract) **SP**
M3 (sample text extract) WE
M4 (sample text extract) SP

Self-promotion (SP) lines in terms of ideational content. The research carefully read the content of each SP from paragraphs 2-6 of the application letters. The researcher applied critical reading and thematic analysis to identify the content of each SP line.

Self-promotion (SP) lines in terms of linguistic features. The researcher read each SP and focused on the language of persuasion used by the writers such as mental state of verb, modality and reference of pronouns.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are more than 10 moves identified in the sample application letters and common to all writers in the current study are greetings, intention, educational qualification, work experience, and gratitude.

Greetings. This move is found in the first paragraph of the AL (application letter) and is mutually shared by the writers. In terms of the strategy and language use by most writers (i.e., Greetings!) they seem to establish rapport in the beginning of their AL. Quite similar with

spoken discourse, setting the tone of conversation by being refine, formal, and pleasant is quite true with the opening lines of the writer. Twenty-three (23) of the writers or 50% started their application letters (ALs) by greeting the reader. Writers seemed to extend their pleasantries to begin their purpose. The writers' communicative goal is to promote themselves as potential employees. The result seems interesting because greetings are usual in a spoken discourse. It might be a local discourse practice than a language style or convention. Comrie [19] posits in his paper "habit of a group" which in this study refers to the language usual to the writers. Notice application letter 07 (AL07), the writer seemed to be comfortable using the dialect (Filipino):

[AL7] *Attached is my resume for your reference.
Thank you very much and God bless po!*

Another instance, AL30 reveals the writer's opening line, (*Hello and good day!*), common to spoken discourse. Perhaps, this move (*greetings*) is also a sign of building rapport and establishing initial positive vibes between the writer and reader. Further, it could be a possibility that writers have checked the background or profile of the employer who happens to be a Christian by religion. The greetings infused with spiritual details might receive good favor from reader.

Intention. Intention of the writer is usually found at the beginning of an application letter followed by the writer's educational qualification. Of the 45 application letters, 25 or 55.55% of the writers introduce themselves and state their intentions before enumerating their educational achievements (degree attained, licensure exams, other continuing degrees course). There were also application letters without specific details of qualifications, instead implicit information is provided to the reader. See extracts below:

[AL25] *I believe I am qualified to teach in your university.*

[AL28] *The enclosed personal data sheet will furnish you with information concerning my overall employment background, education, and skills.*

This move is found in the second paragraph of the writers' AL and is common to most writers in this study. Some of the strategies used by the writers to

convey their thoughts include - using trite or formulaic expressions, invoking emotional appeal, praising institution or employer, and direct expression of intent. In terms of the strategy revealed in the language used by most writers (e.g., AL18 *I am writing this letter to apply..* AL30 *I am writing this letter to indicate my desire to apply any vacant*), it seems that the writers' strategy in using unnecessary words could mean that they are avoiding directness, instead writers appeal to the reader by praising the institution. Sample ALs (AL18, AL2b, AL30) though seemed direct used unnecessary words to convey their intent. Sample texts are provided below:

[AL18, AL 2b] I am writing this letter to apply (title of position)

[AL30] I am writing this letter to indicate my desire to apply any vacant non-teaching available at (name of school, college) withheld my Alma Mater.

Perhaps the opening line could either be an attempt of the writer to avoid being direct or too forward in conveying intent to potential employer, or the writer has predetermined conventions of style or language in business writing.

Educational Qualification (EQ)

Academic qualification is staple in any application letter. It usually contains the degree attained by the applicant and other information relative to professional growth such as a master's degree or career service eligibility. Application letters contain the writers' personal and professional details which primarily aim to sell or promote themselves. The writers introduced themselves (self-intro) and state their intentions before citing their academic qualifications. Quite similar in spoken discourse where interlocutors usually start with pleasantries, then the main purpose of communication. Sample extracts from the application letters are found below. Complete list is found in the appendices.

[AL5] *I am (name of writer) and a resident of (name of place). (Self-intro) I graduated with a degree Bachelor of Science in Business Administration major in Human Resource Development Management las April 2016 at (name of university). (educational qualifications)*

[AL010] *The undersigned is a bonafide resident of (place). Please consider this, my application, for a*

teaching position in your school. (Intention) As my resume reveals, I am a graduate student of (name of school) with a degree of Bachelor in (name of course). (educational qualifications)

Nine (9) writers or 20% start their paragraph 3 by enumerating their educational qualification. Educational qualifications of writers contain their attained degrees and number of years taken and name of university. Additional information to boost their profile are observed. For instance, passing the licensure examination (AL25), expressing a great level of confidence in a field or expertise (AL31), and praising the institution (AL30). Sample texts are found below:

[AL25] *I finished my bachelor's degree in (name of degree) in the university last April 2016 and passed the licensure examination for (name of program or field of specialization) in September of the same year.*

[AL31] *With a degree in (program or area of specialization) I have a full understanding in management and agriculture.*

[AL30] *Having obtained my bachelor's degree in (name of program) major in (field or expertise) in this university, it would indeed be a greatest honor to give back to my beloved Alma Mater by (bringing) sharing my knowledge and skills and commitment to excellence.*

Work Experience (WE)

Employment history of an applicant is important to a potential employer. It narrates past and current responsibilities of applicant to an agency. There were 23 writers or 51.11% who **introduce themselves, state their qualifications** and **intention** before discussing their work experiences. Sample extracts are found below:

[AL8] *My name is (name withheld), 32 years old from (name of place). [self-intro] My experiences include records, inventory, sales, merchandising, to manage (handle) people.. (work experiences)*

[AL29] *I graduated with the degree Bachelor of Science in Agriculture major in Animal Science. (educational qualification). For the past year, I have worked as a Training Specialist.. at the Department of Agriculture and my role includes.... (work experiences).*

[AL21] *I would like to respectfully submit my application for the position Administrative Aide (Farm Worker). [intention] I am working as a Contract of Service (COS) for the last seventeen years (17) at the (name of projects). [Work experiences]*

There were also writers whose details of working experiences are either too short or implicit in the text.

[28] *In each of my previous experiences, I have performed my assignments with a high degree of skill and professionalism.*

[AL2] *I graduated from (name of school withheld) with a degree in (course withheld).[educational qualification]. As you can see from my resume, I have worked in (company withheld) and gained experience in DPRM for six (6) months. (work experience)*

[AL24] *I have the honor to apply for the position of (position withheld). [Intention] At present I'm serving as Clerk at the office of the (office withheld).. [work experience]. I believe that I can better serve this institution if given the chance.*

Skills

Next, skills in an application letter refer to the writers' capabilities to excellently or positively execute the responsibilities of the work applied for in the application letter.

[AL09] *My computer skills are excellent, and also can take shorthand and can transcribe my notes rapidly and accurately.*

[AL011] *I strive to provide students with a stimulus challenging and healthy learning environment.*

[AL05] *I believe that my knowledge and skills in Information Technology can help..*

Noteworthy of the writers' ways of promoting their skills are - mention of their commitment and financial consequence once hired; state their willingness to subject themselves to training; and express words of honor to the agency.

[AL16].. *I also **need personal advancement** which can (enable) (to) help me in sustaining the needs of my family.*

[AL20] *I am willing to **undergo training** to further my capabilities.*

[AL21b] *It is my hope that the above-mentioned justifications together with my determination, willingness, and desire to work in this **esteemed college**.*

[AL26] *I bring to my work commitment to serve our constituent in our **beloved university**.*

Gratitude

This move is common to all writers and is found in paragraphs 5,6,7,8. Writers use "Sir" and "God bless", Godspeed! to extend their gratitude to the potential employer (AL21b, AL2, AL4, AL8). In addition, it is noticeable that writers thank the reader or recipient of the letter for "time and consideration" (AL 10, AL13) and followed by (in the same sentence) words of expectations (e.g., I look forward to ... AL 14, AL07).

[AL2b, AL2, AL4, AL8] *Thank you very much Sir and God bless!*

[AL21b] *Thank you and Godspeed!*

[AL10] *Thank you for your time and consideration*

[AL13] *Thank you for your kind consideration*

[AL14] *Thank you for your time and consideration and I look forward to speaking with you soon.*

[AL07] *I will be very grateful should you consider my application.*

It is also noteworthy that writers (AL2b, AL26, AL32) include words of honor and respect (e.g., *your kind consideration, esteemed college, your thoughtfulness, trusted leadership*) and spiritual appeal (*God Bless*)

[AL26] *Your thoughtfulness concerning my application will be highly appreciated. God bless!*

[AL32] *I hope that permanent position will be given to me under your trusted leadership.*

[AL19] *Thank you sir and more power to you and your entire family*

Other types of opening lines (34 or 75.6%) in paragraphs 6,7, and 8 were found in the sample application letters- expectation, skills, qualifications, contact writer.

[AL25] *I am hoping that you will give me an opportunity to have my first teaching*

[AL09] *After you have reviewed my resume that I enclosed here, I am looking forward for a positive response for my application.*

[AL34] *I may be best contacted through my mobile phone number --- or email address ---*

Next, in terms of rhetorical patterns, lines containing self-promotion (SP) of writers are found in different positions in the paragraph. In terms of structural moves, there are SPs found **after** the writer stated his/her educational qualification work experience, and intention [AL01], [AL03], [AL31], [AL34], [AL26] and [AL05], [AL32]. Moreover, lines of writers' self-promotion (SP) are also found in between educational qualification and work experience (AL04, AL31) and between intention and educational qualification (AL25), (AL29), (AL23), (AL30). Also, self-promotion lines (SP) are found several times after the mention of writers' intention (AL23, AL20). Lastly, there were also paragraphs without writers' self-promotion lines (AL06, AL5, AL6, AL19, AL26, AL011, AL07).

[AL01] **M4** *The academic background and experience I have **maybe relevant** to your requirement (Self-promotion)*

[AL03] **M2** *I also believe that the abilities I have combined with my work ethics, skills, and strong devotion in teaching really contribute on the programs of the school. (Self-promotion)*

[AL05] **M3** *I believe that my knowledge and skills in (field of expertise) can help the innovative enrichment of the institute. (Self-promotion).*

[AL32] **M2** *I was employed from (date) which means that I've been a loyal and a hardworking employee for about 27 years. (Work history, Self-promotion)*

[AL25] **M2** *I believe that I am qualified. (Self-promotion)*

M4 *Though I haven't had an experience in teaching I believe that I am ready to take the responsibility as a teachers as I (have) am already equipped with skill and knowledge through my work experience, training, and seminars (I) attended. (Self-promotion)*

[AL31] **M2** *As a college graduate in our university, I believe the undersigned (have) has the qualification the organization requires. (Self-promotion)*

M4 *With a degree in (name of degree) I have a full understanding in management and agriculture. (Educational Qualification, Self-promotion)*

[AL30] **M2** *I sincerely **believe** I will be a good addition as I am strong, dedicated looking to fill any vacant non-teaching. (Self-promotion)*

[AL23] **M2** *Owing to the fact that I **have much** to contribute in terms of (nature of expertise) knowledge and the safe ways of using... (Self-promotion)*

M3 *With keen knowledge of quality and mastery(Self-promotion)*

M4 *I am **definitely** the right choice(Self-promotion)*

M5 *Besides operation tasks, I am also willing to learn how to (nature of work). (Self-promotion)*

M6 *As an **energetic professional** who has in-depth knowledge of (nature of work) I am usually the first choice for deployment on a project. (Self-promotion)*

[AL30] **M1** *Having obtained my bachelor's degree in Arts major in (field of expertise), it would **indeed** be a great honor to give back **my beloved** Alma Mater by (bringing) sharing my knowledge (and) skills, and (stressing my) commitment to excellence. (Educational Qualification, self-promotion)*

M2 *I sincerely **believe** I will be a good addition as I am strong, dedicated looking to fill any vacant non-teaching... (Self-promotion)*

In sum, self-promotion (SP) lines can be categorized in terms of its approach - deductive and inductive. Writers posit their claims as qualified applicant and support their claims by listing information about their personal and professional capacities. Persuasion statements or self-promotion lines in job application letters are strategically placed and uniquely chosen by writers and attributive factors (e.g., age, gender, type of position applied, and potential reader) could have impact on their structural moves of self-promotion and chosen linguistic resources. Another observation about the writers' self-promotion is that while there were writers who provided details prior to a line of SP, it seems that details need to be extensive. For example, if the details are about the educational qualification, it should contain a very strong background such as awards received in relation to a degree obtained, examinations both career and non-career related, and more possible information to intensify profile (e.g., membership to a professional organization). Such

details are to be found prior to the mention of self-promotion line. Otherwise, the reader might find the SP exaggerating and untruthful. In the same vein, mention of subsequent self-promotion with less details of writers' profile could also be doubtful and a sign of desperation.

In terms of ideational content, there are five (5) observations - first, writers expressed their qualifications and that they are ready because of their working experiences and skills acquired [AL25]; second, writers believe they possess the qualifications required by the institute [AL31]; third, writers say that they are competent in the field of expertise specifically needed by the institution [AL31], [AL23]; third, writers believe that they will be an asset to the institution and will be able to contribute [AL05] [AL30] [AL23] [AL01] [AL03]; lastly, the fifth, writers believe that they have been loyal and hardworking employees [AL32]. In sum, content of self promotion lines found in the writers' application letters are generally very confident, straightforward attestations of their qualifications.

Sample extracts are found below:

[AL25] M2 I believe that I am qualified.

M4 Though I haven't had an experience in teaching I believe that I am ready to take the responsibilities as a teacher as I have already equipped with skill and knowledge through my work experience, trainings and seminars I attended.

[AL31] M2 I believe the undersigned has the qualification the organization requires.

M4 I have the full understanding of management and agriculture.

[AL30] M2 I believe I will be a good addition ..

M1 It would indeed be a great honor to give back to my beloved Alma Mater.

M4 I maybe relevant to (your requirement) to the current vacancy.

[AL03] M2 ..really contribute to the program

[AL05] M3 I can help in the innovation enhancement of the institution.

[AL32] M2 I've been a loyal and hardworking employee.

[AL23] M2 I have much to contribute.

M3 With keen knowledge in (name field of expertise).

M4 I am definitely the right choice.

M5 I am also willing to learn.

M6 As an energetic professional,

[AL30] M2 I will be a good addition..

Next, in terms of the writers' linguistic repertoires, there are three (3) observations - first, writers use the mental verb *believe* to convince readers that they are qualified in terms of skills, working experience, knowledge required by the institute [AL25], [AL31]; also the modal verbs *maybe*, *can* [AL05] are used to convey that they will be an asset if the institution will hire them [AL01]; and intensifiers such as *indeed*, *definitely*, *really* [AL30] [AL03] [AL23] to stress that they are qualified. Second observation, writers used adjectival modifiers to boost their profile such as *loyal*, *hardworking*, *with keen knowledge*, *energetic professional*. Lastly, the third observation, writers mentioned honor and respect to their Alma Mater [AL30]. Worth-noting in this investigation is that the writers generally used hedges or a type of language to tone down their qualifications.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Effective communication in business writing demands that essential components in this case in an application letter are present such as details of qualification, work experience, skills and training, contact details, and other important professional advancement to strengthen profile of applicant. There are observations as to the structural moves used by the writers, strategies in terms of language of persuasion, and ideational content of self-promotion.

First, as to the structural moves, there are two approaches common to the writers in this study: deductive and inductive. Writers stated a general line (or lines) of self-promotion (SP) followed by details of their capacities and skills while others list details of their personal and professional capacities followed by a line (or lines) of self-promotion. An observation worth noting is that there are application letters with self-promotion (SP) lines found after a litany of writers' qualification, work experiences, skills, and others found after the writers' immediate mention of one or two qualifications. While SPs provide an emphasis of qualification and a lasting impression to the reader, it might cause misunderstanding brought about by a very abrupt mention of SP or very exhaustive mention of qualification. The reader might doubt the intention of the writer because the timing or sequence of the delivery of SP is culturally link to the writer. The reader can either feel bored with very exhaustive litany of qualification or abrupt from very short details of writers' profile. Expectations of either

a reader or a speaker vary because of culture and not necessarily a concern of competence.

Next, in terms of the ideational content and linguistic repertoires found in the writers' self-promotion lines, it is interesting to note that while writers assert their qualifications, the language used to do this is quite weak as shown in their use of mental and modal verbs.

Results of this study underpin pedagogic business writing and sheds light on the interface of culture and writing in English. First, teaching effective written communication entails a rich discussion of culture for without it, it might impinge the writer's goal. Writing SPs is culturally-based activity which might be a case of misunderstanding between the writer and reader. Presence (or absence) of SPs could mean indifference to the reader. Second, while self-promotion in job application letters is not entirely necessary, it is important that the writer place premium on the choice of words to form the job application letters' ideational content, and equally be ethical without pressuring the reader (or the writer appearing desperate). Finally, the limitations of the current study will serve as part of further investigation.

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