Real World Writing: What Employers Expect

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Millennials, those born in the 1980s and 1990s, are better educated than any previous US generation, yet 18-24 year-olds today face the highest unemployment since 1948 when the federal government began collecting such data (National Chamber Foundation). Most college students have unrealistic expectations about their post-college career opportunities. In one study, two-thirds expressed an expectation of obtaining top-tier jobs, “a mathematical impossibility” (National Chamber Foundation 8). Millennials, then, have every reason to be aware of what their future employers expect.

“Recruiters and companies are saying, 'Send us a writing sample, and if you don't meet our standards for communication, we are not hiring you'" (Holland). College students often don’t realize how important on-the-job writing is. One Sacramento State graduate reports, “I strongly believed that once I graduated I was not going to need many writing skills because I was going into Engineering. I was wrong. I am writing daily. If I knew this back then, I would have taken additional writing courses” (Melzer and Pickrel).

When the National Commission on Writing surveyed large U.S. corporations employing a total of 3.7 million people, the commission found that “writing is a ticket to professional opportunity,” a skill that is key to obtaining a salaried job (3, 6). Over half of these corporations consider writing when hiring professional employees. “Applicants who provide poorly written letters wouldn’t get an interview,” one corporate spokesperson states (National Commission on Writing 10). Another says, “Generally, the staffing office would not pass along a badly written resume to the hiring divisions” (National Commission on Writing 10).

The corporate employers in the National Commission’s study reflect strong dissatisfaction with new employees’ writing skills. “The skills of new college graduates are deplorable – across the board; spelling, grammar, sentence structure . . . I can’t believe people come out of college now not knowing what a sentence is,” one disgruntled employer states (14). A Bentley University study also reveals employers’, recruiters’, and recent college graduates’ strong dissatisfaction with entry-level workers’ skills. “The consensus . . . is that the youngest members of the workforce are not in fact well prepared to begin their careers” (20).

While many college students rate content-knowledge as most important, employers disagree (Bentley University). Over 90% of employers in a study by the Association of American Colleges and Universities rate clear communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities as more important than an applicant’s major. Similarly, when
the National Commission on Writing asked employers to identify which aspect of on-the-job writing is most valued, clear communication appears at the top of the list.

“It’s not that companies want to hire Tolstoy. But they need people who can write clearly, and many employees and applicants fall short of that standard” (Dillon). The National Commission on Writing found that corporate employers link “clear writing with clear thinking” (19). Sacramento State graduates polled in the “Study of Alumni Writing in the Workplace” also emphasize the need for persuasive logic in their on-the-job writing. An engineer states, “Much of the writing required in the engineering field is done to convince others to accept [our] engineering judgments and the validity of [our] conclusions” (Melzer and Pickrel).

Unclear communication can lead to lawsuits, lower productivity, costly mistakes, and loss of clients (Ferraro; Schnitt). A Sacramento-area writing consultant explains, “Bad, weak writing is costing [companies] billions of dollars each year” (Ferraro). The Bentley University study found that “two-thirds of business leaders agree that newly hired recent college graduates who are not well prepared harm the productivity of their organization’s day-to-day business” (10).

Technology-based writing can be challenging for new employees. A Sacramento State graduate states, “Anything I email to a co-worker has the potential to be seen by upper management, and I have to take that into consideration” (Melzer and Pickrel). Another graduate points out, “Spell-check will not always save you” (Melzer and Pickrel). A corporate spokesperson notes, “It’s increasingly important to be able to convey content in a tight, logical, direct manner, particularly in a fast-paced technological environment” (National Commission on Writing 8).

Millennials are more technologically savvy than any previous generation (National Chamber Foundation), yet they are unaware of the level of professionalism required on the job (Bentley University). One executive vice president states, “Because everything is shorthand and text, the ability to communicate effectively is challenged” (Holland). New employees are often surprised to find that the writing standards for business communication are much higher than the standards for personal communication. Text-messaging shorthand, such as “u” for “you,” is unacceptable.

College students may also be surprised to find out how much on-the-job writing is required. One employer remarks, “Because of email, more employees have to write more often. Also, a lot more has to be documented” (National Commission on Writing 4). A police officer in the Sacramento State study concurs. “I was amazed at the large quantity of writing that is required for patrol officers and detectives. It is my experience that most, if not all, new officers are similarly surprised at the amount of report-writing in the law enforcement arena.”
Different business writing tasks require different styles of writing. The National Commission’s study found that “corporate respondents make clear distinctions between the different requirements for writing, depending on purpose and audience” (12). A purchaser agrees. “I have to be able to figure out what a salesperson, a warehouse worker, and even my boss want of me” (Melzer and Pickrel). Writing on the job requires flexibility. New employees will have to adjust to the company’s requirements and will have to learn more than one style.

Business writing “is much more concise than what I was taught in school. Letters and memos are more direct and to the point,” one Sac State graduate told researchers (Melzer and Pickrel). Writing clearly and concisely requires specific attention to word choice and sentence structure. The police officer in the Sacramento State study shows how this is true for law enforcement: “Subtle change in word-choice and sentence structure can suggest a different sequence of events, thoughts, and actions. Such differing perceptions can create major issues when analyzing the legality of a search [or] arrest.”

Writing is not only key for entry-level positions, but also key for advancing in a career. Half of the corporations surveyed by the National Commission on Writing consider writing a “threshold skill” for promotion (3). One employer states, “You can’t move up without writing skills” (National Commission on Writing 3). Some jobs even require employees to submit writing samples in order to be considered for a promotion (Melzer and Pickrel). An engineer reveals that for employees with weak writing skills, “advancement within the company will be very, very slow” (Melzer and Pickrel).

College students may be surprised by the importance of on-the-job writing and may feel overwhelmed by the high standards of writing that employers demand. However, the best time for students to raise their awareness about real world writing is while they are still students. The Bentley University study strongly recommends that career counseling begin freshman year and that internships be mandatory. Respondents in the Sacramento State study also recommend that students participate in an internship while in college.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities study recommends students “apply their learning in real-world settings.” One Sac State graduate agrees. “Students can prepare better for writing on their jobs by getting familiar with the types of documents” their employers will require (Melzer and Pickrel). Another alumnus encourages students simply to “practice” their writing skills (Melzer and Pickrel). Garry Cosnett, head of one firm’s global communications, reminds job applicants: “so much is driven by the written word” (Holland).
Works Cited


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