

Real World Writing: What Employers Expect

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This article presents evidence from ten research studies and from experts in the field to show that strong writing skills are essential in obtaining a salaried job and in performing to employer expectations on the job, even in fields not normally associated with writing.

Generation Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, are under immense pressure to pursue a four-year college degree (Parker). Data from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics for 2019 show why. Those with a bachelor's degree earn 60% more than those with just a high school diploma, and those with a master's degree earn double. However, joining the labor force of salaried workers is competitive, especially now, with fall-out from the COVID-19 recession. Gen Z, then, has every reason to be aware of what their future employers expect.

“Spelling and grammatical mistakes are among the top reasons a job applicant's resume lands in the trash,” according to Ian Siegel, CEO of Zip Recruiter, a company that matches employers and applicants through artificial intelligence (Doheny). College students often don't realize how important on-the-job writing is. 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). While this study was conducted in 2004, more recent research reveals that this is still true today.

A 2019 survey by the National Association of Colleges and Employers found that four out of five employers named “written communication skills” as the quality they value most in addition to a strong GPA. “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). Ken Schlechter, founder of Kenneth Michael Consulting Services, explains: “A poorly written document affects your credibility” (Doheny). A document with an accumulation of mistakes “sends a message of laziness and incompetence” (Doheny).

A Dell Technologies survey of 12,000 Gen Z students found that they are “confident about their tech skills but unsure about their readiness for the workforce.” A separate study by LinkedIn shows that “while Gen Z is anticipated to bring an unprecedented level of technology skills to the workforce, organizational leaders express apprehension about their interpersonal communication skills” (Poague). The LinkedIn study also reveals that learning and development leaders value soft skills, such as communication, over technical skills (Poague).

“Advanced communication and negotiation” are soft skills that are predicted to increase in demand between now and 2030, according to a McKinsey Global Institute report (Jezard). Yet many members of Generation Z feel that hard skills will be valued more (Poague). A 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).

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). A 2018 survey of college seniors and their potential employers found that about 80% of college seniors rated themselves as “competent in oral and written communication and critical thinking,” but only about half of employers agreed (Bauer-Wolf).

Formality and professionalism is one problem area that’s been identified. Advanced Placement high school teachers in a Pew Research study identified increased digital communication as a cause (Purcell et al.). These teachers point to “an increasingly ambiguous line between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ writing”; a lack of awareness about “writing for different audiences”; and “cultural emphasis on truncated forms of expression” such as those found in texting and social media (Purcell et al.). Yet increased formality and audience awareness are precisely what new employees need.

Recent college grads often have difficulty making the shift to a more formal writing style, especially in email and other in-house communication, according to a Bentley University study. An executive vice president states, “Because everything is shorthand and text, the ability to communicate effectively is challenged” (Holland). A Sacramento State graduate reveals, “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).

Different business writing tasks require different styles of writing. The National Commission on Writing study found that “corporate respondents make clear distinctions between the different requirements for writing, depending on purpose and audience” (12). A Sac State grad 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.

James Tenser, founder of marketing advisory firm VSN strategies, notes: “Poor grammar obscures or even changes meaning sometimes, which can result in misunderstanding and bad outcomes” (Doheny). A 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” (Melzer and Pickrel).

College students may also be surprised to find out *how much* on-the-job writing is required. The police officer in the Sacramento State study explains: “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” (Melzer and Pickrel). Vivek Ravisankar, CEO of HackerRank, posits that as more and more work becomes asynchronous, “clear writing could be the antidote” to video-conferencing fatigue and disparate time zones, “especially for engineers.” Ravisankar notes that “instead of developing a presentation, Amazon has teams write a six-page memo for every project.”

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. Gen Z students are open to that. “Many of them would be interested in a first-year internship or an entrepreneurship class as a general education option,” according to a study of 1,100 Generation Z students from 15 different colleges (Seemiller qtd. in Loveland). The same research also shows that Gen Z is “very career-minded, having seen adults around them lose their jobs in the midst of high unemployment rates” (Loveland).

Research analysts encourage policymakers to forge stronger connections between education and careers in order to ease “the school-to-work transition for post-Millennial generations” (Hanson and Gulish). An Association of American Colleges and Universities study recommends students “apply their learning in real-world settings.” One Sac State graduate advises, “Students can prepare better for writing on their jobs by getting familiar with the types of documents” their employers will require (Melzer and Pickrel). Many universities, including Sacramento State, provide internship and job placement through a Career Center which may also offer job fairs, practice interviews, resume workshops, and even financial aid for office attire. However, the onus is on students to seek that assistance. Overall, the “benefit of internships and other experiential learning opportunities is undisputed” (College of St. Scholastica).

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