

The Role of Institutions of Higher Education in Preparing Students to Write in the Workplace: Suggestions for Writing Curricula and Pedagogy

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Abstract

Employers have expressed discontent with the workplace skill sets and overall professionalism of recent college graduates. Employers specifically report that graduates lack important work-related writing skills such as editing, research, and data analysis skills. The literature continually provides metrics on recent graduates' weaknesses as workplace writers. If graduates are to maximize their marketability to employers, perceived writing gaps must be addressed specifically in the context of higher education writing curricula and pedagogy. Based on employer reports on the specific writing skill sets lacking in recent college graduates, this article is a primer on the topic of meeting employers' workplace writing needs and puts forth (1) the context behind and causes of a workplace writing skills gap in recent college graduates, (2) curricular and pedagogical suggestions for institutions of higher education (IHEs) to strengthen work-related writing competencies in college students, and (3) recommendations for future research pertaining to meeting the writing needs of the workplace.

Keywords: higher education, writing skills, writing curricula, work skills, career preparation

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the Problem

Employers have expressed overall concern with the skill sets possessed by recent college graduates (Education Journal, 2014; Goldschmidt, 2005; Hart, 2013; Head, 2012; Maguire, 2012; Stevens, 2005). The literature reveals that the work-related skills desired by employers can be grouped into "hard" skills pertaining to specific specialized knowledge and abilities and

“soft” skills that pertain to interpersonal competencies (Al Shayeb, 2013; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Ghannadian, 2013). Hard skills include specific content knowledge bases and business-related abilities such as accounting or finance skills, typing skills, research skills, and critical thinking skills (Andrews & Higson, 2008; GMAC, 2011). Soft skills represent a wide variety of abilities in the eyes of employers pertaining to teamwork (Bailey & Flegle, 2012), having a positive work ethic (Lowden et al., 2011, and problem-solving (Maguire Research Associates, 2012; Wye & Lim, 2009).

Along with other communicative soft skills, employers consistently assert that writing skills are essential to workplace success yet many hiring managers believe that recent college graduates lack important work-related writing competencies (Conrad & Newberry, 2012; Gray, 2022; Herrity, 2023; McCoy, 2021). As employer demands for written communication proficiencies at work grow, IHEs have an important opportunity to produce graduates who are better prepared to write at work. Based on employer reports on the specific writing skill sets lacking in recent graduates, this paper puts forth (1) the context behind and causes of a workplace writing skills gap in recent college graduates, (2) curricular and pedagogical suggestions for IHEs to bolster workplace writing competencies in college students, and (3) recommendations for future research pertaining to meeting the writing needs of the workplace.

1.2 Workplace Writing Skills Gap

A “skills gap” refers to a shortage of available talent in the workforce caused by a difference in the skills required by employers and the actual skills possessed by employees. A skills gap is evident in many business fields including finance and banking (Al Shayeb, 2013; Ting & Ying, 2012). A shortage of available talent in the workforce has significant business implications concerning the ability to serve customer needs and overall workforce productivity. This shortage suggests that employees are not receiving the training necessary to satisfy the needs of the workplace.

Writing skills have been specifically identified by employers as being important for workplace success. Nearly half of employers seek job candidates with strong written communication skills (Gray, 2022). Writing skills gaps are among the largest skills gaps reported by employers when assessing new graduates (Archer & Davison, 2008; Dalporto & Lepe, 2022; Lentz, 2013; Parent et al., 2011; Reardon, 2015). A *Payscale* (2016) survey conducted on 63,924 hiring managers on their thoughts on recent college graduates' abilities to write found that 44% of managers believe that recent college graduates lack professional writing skills. Some of the basic general written skills that employers look for in new graduates include proficiencies related to spelling, grammar, vocabulary, proofreading, outlining, and note taking (McCoy, 2021). Additional desirable written communication skills include sending email, drafting reports, data analysis, grant writing, research, editing, revising, and producing presentations (College Board, 2003; Herrity, 2023).

Writing in the workplace is important for many reasons as it provides credibility to an employer, enables great communication, signals competence internally and externally, and directly results in productivity such as increased sales (McCoy, 2021; Test Gorilla). Yet despite their expressed emphasis on the importance of writing skills in the workplace, employers

report that a third of all workers fall short of their expectations for job-related writing skills (College Board, 2003).

1.3 Causes of the Workplace Writing Skills Gap

Reasons behind this written communications skills gap in college graduates have been connected to an increase in the number of people entering the workforce each year (Scion Staffing, 2023), significant workplace personnel changes and local economic conditions (Walkme, 2022), the need for advanced technological skill sets that potential employees have not yet developed (Drevitch, 2023), issues resulting from the Covid-19 Pandemic (Bigthink, 2022), employer perceptions that students do not realize how important on-the-job writing is (Linville, 2021) and the employer perception that both secondary and post-secondary institutions are not adequately preparing students for the rigors of workplace writing (Achieve, 2015; Talentculture, 2019). A significant proportion of the literature on the writing skills gap concerns the role IHEs play in preparing students for the workplace.

The lack of perceived adequate workplace preparation provided by IHEs might be attributed to institutional curricular or pedagogical priorities and insufficiencies. For example, in terms of pedagogy, community college instructors in various academic disciplines may not assign writing to their students because their students may not be strong writers and instructors may not believe they are writing instructors (Tucker, 2017). The demands on professors to cover course content and large grading loads have left instructors with little time to teach writing skills or provide students with substantial feedback on papers (McRell, Wilson, & Levkoff, 2021). Further, because it is presumed that students learn basic writing skills during high school including knowledge of punctuation, grammar, sentence structure, and citations, some instructors may neglect to focus any class time on writing development (McRell, Wilson, & Levkoff, 2021). Further still, instructors may not be prepared to teach writing as communication technology has impacted patterns of communication and in some cases eroded forms necessary to academic discourse and replaced it with emojis and text-speak (Strauss, 2017).

Questions pertaining to how and where students should be prepared to write in the world of work remain salient. It has been argued that the curricula at secondary and post-secondary institutions are not necessarily designed to prepare students to write for the workplace as secondary schools often focus on teaching writing to satisfy standardized reading and writing goals (Strauss, 2017) and the curricula of nonvocational post-secondary programs are designed around subject-matter competency as opposed to workplace preparation (Talentculture, 2019). Despite the causes of the writing skills gap, IHEs currently have an important opportunity to address the workplace writing demands of employers and concurrently increase the marketability of future graduates.

2. Lens for Analysis

Attempts to remedy writing deficiencies cost American corporations as much as \$3.1 billion annually and sending a single worker for remedial training in writing can cost more than \$3000 (College Board, 2004). Despite reporting gaps between employee writing skills and the needs

of industry, employers have several suggestions concerning how IHEs can better equip graduates with these skills. Based on the literature pertaining to employers' perceptions of the work writing skills of recent college graduates, this article will articulate suggestions for IHEs to better prepare students for writing in the workplace and increase overall workplace readiness.

To help students more sufficiently develop the writing skills employers desire, employers generally suggest that IHEs more closely align curricular programs with specific employer needs (Kasim & Ali, 2010; Moslehifar & Ibrahim, 2012), increase the rigor of writing standards (Stevens, 2005), and provide students with more opportunities to speak in public and receive feedback on their writing (Stevens, 2005; Sundberg et al., 2011). These general suggestions can figure prominently within improved approaches for teaching workplace writing competencies on college campuses. In response to the literature pertaining to the writing skills gap and employers' writing needs for employees, this article functions as a primer for understanding and meeting employers' workplace writing needs. The following suggestions for addressing the workplace writing skills gap include: (1) a mandatory first year workplace writing requirement; (2) increased writing opportunities and work-related content; (3) hiring faculty with writing instruction backgrounds; and (4) increased employer-institution collaboration.

3. Addressing the Workplace Writing Skills Gap

Based on the literature pertaining to employers' perceptions of the writing skills of recent college graduates, the following suggestions are put forth to address the workplace writing skills gap.

3.1 Mandatory First-Year Workplace Writing Requirement

One specific curricular suggestion for IHEs would be to implement a required, immersive first-year course for all incoming students that exclusively and directly introduces important workplace writing competencies. Such a course would not only focus on the more basic universal writing skills such as vocabulary usage, proofreading, tone, and outlining but could also address specific workplace skill sets relating to overall professionalism, email writing, phone etiquette, report and grant writing, teamwork, business writing, research writing, time-management, self-assessments, performance reviews, job interviewing etc. within certain work fields and disciplines such as healthcare, banking, business, science fields etc. Several writing assignments, peer-reviews, extensive feedback, revision, and presentation requirements would be hallmarks of the course.

This course should include assignments that directly mirror workplace writing tasks such as memos, report writing, and emails and generally reflect a workplace environment where workplace conventions apply. Instructors for this course might assume the role of boss or supervisor and thus allow students' writing assignments to represent the entire company/organization. The instructor/boss would take the position of investing themselves in student work beyond traditional academic obligations by simulating the persona of a workplace boss (Garay, 1995). Beyond this first-year course, advanced professional writing

courses could be required at later stages of the undergraduate trajectory such as in the junior and senior years so that students can revisit important specific work-related writing skills after they have declared an academic major.

A final important element within this first-year writing requirement course and throughout all subsequent writing courses will be guidance on the use of increasingly prominent artificial intelligence (AI) language processing programs such as ChatGPT. The goal in AI program use instruction should be to provide guidance on the creative and productive use of AI in workplace writing situations and to discourage intellectual dishonesty. Although AI programs may help one understand more about important academic and workplace content, students should also be introduced to some of the potential programmatic drawbacks of using chatbots such as issues with incorporating personal experiences, synthesizing sources, producing novel ideas, and analyzing the strengths and weaknesses of journal articles (American University, n.d.). Students can benefit from receiving direct instruction with using AI technology to produce writing deliverables such as help with entering prompts into chat bots and assessing the usefulness of results (Swift, 2023). The basic idea is for the instructor (employers might offer guidance to instructors on how AI programs are productively used in the workplace) to set clear conduct codes about the use of AI technology in completing assignments and to help students understand where AI technology can be useful and useless within the writing process.

3.2 Increased Writing Opportunities and Work-related Content

Another suggestion for IHEs would be to increase the amount and type of writing students do in each course across the curriculum. While writing across the curriculum initiatives are widespread in higher education, institutions should continue to monitor how frequently and in what capacities students are writing within these initiatives. Students can benefit from more substantive opportunities to write. This might mean that a longer writing assignment could be required in all academic discipline coursework even within some traditionally non writing intensive fields such as math and the sciences. Writing instruction and assignments might be delivered traditionally during class time and through on-campus writing programs and through digital peer writing workshops administered asynchronously online (Pâquet, 2023). Ultimately, when creating writing opportunities for students, instructors must be mindful of the time and energy required for students to accomplish specific writing tasks and the time necessary to provide meaningful feedback on these tasks to mitigate against writing and assessment burnout.

Within each course, more opportunities could be created to stress workplace content and competencies such as critical thinking, data analysis, collaboration, debate, the navigation of complex ethical dilemmas, and feedback on both written and vocal presentations. Additional workplace writing-related course content and assignments to be infused across the curricula might include: the use of digital writing aides and software (e.g., MS 365, Turnitin, social media writing applications, computerized writing feedback technology, presentation software etc.); exposure to trade associations and workplace culture; required peer review sessions and visits to campus writing centers; and the creation of a writing portfolio that can showcase learned skills, growth as a writer, and work-related writing samples.

3.3 Faculty with Writing Instruction Backgrounds

Teaching writing cannot solely be viewed as the domain of English and composition departments. IHEs should consider hiring faculty members within all academic disciplines who have demonstrated the ability to teach and stress the value of writing. Institutions must hire instructors with proven writing instruction capabilities and assess these capabilities periodically throughout the time an instructor remains employed. IHEs might require instructors to possess proven writing instruction abilities before being hired and require them to continuously have these teaching skills assessed on a periodic basis as part of performance reviews.

In addition, instructors might feel compelled to reach out to local employers for guest in-class presentations, internship activities, and team-taught courses. Instructors might also collaborate with other faculty members who are pointedly teaching work-related writing skills in their courses. This collaboration could be used to consolidate ideas about teaching writing for the workplace. Instructors without experience teaching writing might reach out to more experienced faculty members to give in-class presentations on writing for the workplace.

3.4 Employer-Institution Collaboration

Finally, IHEs should be diligent and exhaustive about aligning their writing curricula with the needs of the workplace. Employers need to be given many varied opportunities to provide input on student writing performance and the writing curriculum in general. Employer-IHE partnerships should allow local employers from a variety of businesses to help construct the writing curricula and offer periodic reviews on how successful recent graduates are doing in terms of workplace writing proficiencies. This might take the form of employers directly monitoring students through work-study and apprenticeship opportunities or by sending employers samples of student writing for review in addition to employer class visits and the presence of employers at collegiate department and institutional executive board meetings. Employers may value electronic portfolios from students (Hart Research Associates, 2013). Portfolios allow employers to view electronic writing samples from current students so that employers can evaluate the degree to which students are being sufficiently prepared with writing skill sets for the workplace. Institutions, with the help of employer inputs, might also allow students to earn specific badges for acquired workplace writing skill sets such as professionalism, emailing, or memo writing that are placed on their diplomas (Blumenstyk, 2015; Dalporto & Lepe, 2022).

In addition, both IHEs and employers would benefit from understanding how employers assess writing skill sets in job applicants. Employers can share documents with institutions such as job advertisements, HR documents, and company hiring policy manuals pertaining to how job applicants' writing skills were specifically vetted and assessed during the hiring process. This would provide students with an important glimpse into the world of work and help better prepare them for the interview process and the type of writing that is expected at work.

Further, employer-IHE collaborations should include in-person experiences for students. Experiences can include internships that directly expose students to writing in the workplace and allow students to develop industry-specific writing skills while earning academic credits. This might occur through a school-sponsored internship with a partnering employer during a school term or through a work shadowing program. Work-based learning opportunities at businesses are an effective way of providing students with relevant writing skills and awareness of business culture (Lowden et al., 2011) and show that employers value good writing (Lentz, 2013). Experiential learning classes or weekend career training workshops could be offered to simulate work situations (Ghannadian, 2013). IHEs should also maintain strong career service centers that could help students secure internships prior to graduation and expand their networks with local companies.

Finally, employers with adequate resources can benefit from building on their collaborations with IHEs by installing skill-building courses within the workplace. The acquisition and development of workplace writing skills should not end at graduation. Workplace writing programs can provide new and more experienced workers professional development opportunities to build writing and other important workplace skill sets periodically throughout their careers. Such writing programs might provide formal writing training, group coaching, or one-on-one mentoring to allow employees to upskill in areas that both employees and employers value (Murphy, 2019). When possible, this would allow employers to build soft-skills development into every aspect of their people strategy and management from staffing strategy and on-boarding to performance management, leadership training, and talent development (Drevitch, 2023).

4. Need for Additional Research

The literature on the role of IHEs in preparing students for the writing demands of the workplace is lacking overall and specifically in terms of sample populations and content. Research using different participant populations (e.g., different demographic populations pertaining to race, gender, social class, age, geographical location etc.) is needed to explore how recent college graduates from different backgrounds are doing in terms of meeting employers' writing needs.

Research is also needed concerning the perceived workplace writing skill sets of recent graduates working in different work fields. For example, is there a difference in how recent graduates perform work-related writing tasks in specific work disciplines such as healthcare or advertising or engineering?

Further, the role of a student's particular academic training or college major might be explored. Might a recent graduate's academic major be connected to workplace writing performance? Future studies should investigate which college majors or departments/programs may be better preparing students for workplace writing in the eyes of employers. This research could aim to locate why and how students with certain college majors may be better suited for workplace writing.

In addition, research is needed that focuses more specifically on the performance of specific

types of IHEs in preparing students to meet employers' workplace writing needs. For example, is there a difference in the quality of writing preparation provided by national universities as opposed to liberal arts colleges or proprietary institutions etc.? Does an institution's size or student population demographics or private versus public status make a difference in preparing students to write at work? How do predominantly online institutions fare against traditional brick and mortar institutions in workplace writing preparation?

Furthermore, additional information is needed pertaining to the perceived value of employer-IHE collaborations. What do college administrators, writing instructors, students, and employers report pertaining to the benefits and weaknesses of these partnerships? What adjustments or additional efforts need to be made by both IHEs and employers to increase the effectiveness of these collaborations?

A final suggestion for future research pertains to perceptions of educational writing preparation from the vantage point of recent college graduates. Significant research documenting employers' perceptions of the workplace performance of recent college graduates has been conducted but what do the graduates themselves believe about their own writing preparation for the workplace? Do graduate perceptions align with employers' perceptions? Are graduates dissatisfied with their initial writing abilities in the workplace? Do graduates and employers agree on the writing skills that are most important in the workplace? Do graduates of certain academic departments and disciplines have different perceptions of their initial writing capabilities than graduates of other departments or disciplines? Do graduates believe specific college courses have helped prepare them for writing at work more than others? Do graduates believe they have competencies or deficiencies in certain areas or elements of workplace writing? These will be important questions to investigate in order to correct negative employer perceptions of the workplace writing skills of recent graduates.

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