

Chapter 35

Writing: The Neglected “R” in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Writing proficiency is a foundational skill for success in the workplace. Rapid change driven by economic pressures and technological advances requires workers skilled at communicating flexibly and effectively. Nevertheless, writing skills are weak across all segments of the U.S. population. This chapter focuses on the state of affairs in the U.S. regarding writing, which the National Commission on Writing calls the “neglected ‘R’” in the classic trilogy of reading, ‘riting, and ‘rithmetic. Some empirical research is available on how to facilitate adults’ acquisition of writing skills, but it is remarkably scant. Some suggestions for improvement in schools, universities, and workplaces are provided.

INTRODUCTION

Writing is one of the two pillars of basic literacy. Writing allows us to express ourselves personally and publicly, communicate with others, gather and clarify information, explore our thoughts and feelings, document and transmit our findings, and exercise our rights and duties as citizens.

“At its best, writing has helped transform the world. Revolutions have been started by it. Oppression has been toppled by it. And it has enlightened the human condition. American life has been richer because people like Rachel Carson, Cesar Chavez, Thomas Jefferson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. have given voice to the aspirations of the nation and its people” (National Commission on Writing, 2003, p. 10).

Success in school requires basic writing skills (Graham & Perin, 2007c). Students must learn to

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write clearly and effectively so they can compose reports, take exams, and otherwise express themselves in their classrooms, both online and face to face. Students also need to be able to write to learn by refining their thoughts, developing critical thinking skills, and learning essential subject matter (Graham & Perin, 2007c).

Writing is also required in the workplace, where the writing skills necessary for successful employment are now equivalent to those needed in college (Graham & Perin, 2007c). Roughly 98% of our occupations require writing in some form (Taylor, 1989). Writing skills can be particularly crucial for student interns and new hires asked to perform the writing tasks related to their new jobs (Reio & Sutton, 2006). Basic writing skills include composing clear emails and memos, and providing written directions for coworkers via email. Higher-order skills might entail extensive analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation while preparing a corporate report for stockholders (Philippi, 1996; Schneider & Andre, 2005).

The National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges, which surveyed 120 human resource directors in companies affiliated with the Business Roundtable and employing almost 8 million people, confirmed that writing is an essential "threshold skill" (National Commission on Writing, 2004, p. 3) for highly skilled, well paying, professional work. "People who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion," according to one human resources director (p. 3). "Writing ability could be your ticket in...or it could be your ticket out," agreed another (p. 3). Human resource directors in state governments concur. A survey of the state human resources directors conducted by the National Governors Association revealed that good writing is even more important in state government jobs than it is in the private sector (National Commission on Writing, 2005).

Advances in technology have made writing skills even more important than they were in the

past (National Commission on Writing, 2004). To address the mounting need for rapid and accurate communication locally, nationally, and globally, industry and business leaders increasingly are employing written communication in email, blogs, Facebook, Twitter, and wikis, all of which are specific genres or types of writing. For example, 15 years ago, email was cutting-edge technology in the workplace, and its use as a communication tool for employees and customers was sporadic at best. Currently, one would be hard pressed to find a workplace where email is not used extensively. Similarly, even five years ago, managers and principals had little need to be knowledgeable about blogs and wikis; now such expertise seems almost a requirement for maintaining effective communication. We can thus expect that new computer skills will be in continual demand for a variety of workplace contingencies (e.g., introduction of a new phone system, computer software, or diagnostic equipment). Such innovations require the ability not only to write, but to write well. In addition, today's multicultural contexts demand an even more sophisticated and culturally sensitive understanding of writing, as crosscultural misunderstandings can create unnecessary conflict and deter worker productivity (Lim & Teo, 2009).

Sociologists and economists argue that literacy (reading and writing) is probably the most basic form of human capital (Becker, 1975). Individuals who invest time and money in developing their literacy skills can expect a better quality of life both in the short and long term (Krahn, 1997). As President Vartan Gregorian (2007) of the Carnegie Corporation of New York stated, "the ability to read, comprehend, and write—in other words, to organize information into *knowledge*—can be viewed as tantamount to a survival skill" (p. 2). On the organizational level, both small and large employers expect high school and college graduates to perform job tasks for which they have little to no previous experience without remediation. If investments in employees are to be made, organizations want this training to develop

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