excerpts from: Real World Writing: What Employers Expect
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Just as high school seniors are unprepared for college writing, many college graduates are unprepared for on-the-job writing. 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."

College students often don't realize how important on-the-job writing is. When the National Commission on Writing recently 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. 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.

Writing is not only key for obtaining a job, but also key for advancing in a career. Half of the corporations surveyed consider writing a "threshold skill" for promotion (National 3). One employer states, "you can't move up without writing skills".

College students may also be surprised to find out how much on-the-job writing is required. The police officer in the CSUS WAC alumni survey study continues, "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." "Communication through email...is almost universal," the study claims. One employer remarks, "Because of email, more employees have to write more often. Also, a lot more has to be documented".

New employees are often surprised to find that the writing standards for business email are much higher than the standards for personal email. Text-messaging shorthand, such as "u" for "you," is unacceptable. 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...Email writing can be so poor as to prevent communication of necessary information, as this email message sent in a high-tech Palo Alto firm clearly shows:

I updated the Status report for the four discrepancies Lennie forwarded us via e-mail (they in Barry file)...to make sure my logic was correct It seems we provide Murray with incorrect information...However after verifying control on JBL (JBL has the indicator as B)...I wanted to make sure with the recent changes - I process today - before Murray makes the changes again on the mainframe to ‘C’.

Along with clarity, conciseness is also highly valued by 92% of corporations surveyed by the National Commission on Writing (National 28). "It's increasingly important to be able to convey content in a tight, logical, direct manner, particularly in a fast-paced technological environment" one corporate spokesperson notes (National 8). "Professional experience outside the classroom...taught me that writing clearly and concisely wasn't something that just my professors wanted to see" one administrative assistant notes.

Writing clearly and concisely requires specific attention to word choice and sentence structure. The police officer in the alumni study continues, "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.

"...An engineering alumnus agrees. "I am surprised by the amount of care required to convey a specific idea...It is not the amount of writing as much as the quality required." Studies show that careful attention to grammar is also needed. On-the-job writing must also demonstrate clear and persuasive logic. One employer comments, "My view is that good writing is a sign of good thinking. Writing that is persuasive, logical, and orderly is impressive. Writing that's not careful can be a signal of unclear thinking."

Different business writing tasks require different styles of writing. The National Commission on Writing study found that "[c]orporate respondents make clear distinctions between the different requirements for writing, depending on purpose and audience" (12). An administrator explains:

In a work environment, [an employee is] subject to utilizing writing skills for different purposes. For example, [she] may need to provide information so a worker can accomplish a job,...to persuade someone [to] a course of action,...to communicate the evaluation of someone's performance,...or to advertise to attract candidates to a position.

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. Another suggests, "Students can better prepare for on-the-job writing by doing [an] internship while in school." And lastly, an alumnus encourages students simply to "practice" their writing skills.