

Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners
for Lifewide Writing

*Edited by Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore,
and Paula Rosinski*

Elon University Center for Engaged Learning
Elon, North Carolina
www.CenterForEngagedLearning.org

©2022 by Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore, and Paula Rosinski. This work is made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) license.

Series editors: Jessie L. Moore and Peter Felten
Copyeditor and designer: Jennie Goforth

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Bleakney, Julia | Moore, Jessie L. | Rosinski, Paula

Title: Writing Beyond the University / Julia Bleakney, Jessie L. Moore, and Paula Rosinski

Description: Elon, North Carolina : Elon University Center for Engaged Learning, [2022] | Series: Center for engaged learning open access book series | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022945867 | ISBN (PDF) 978-1-951414-08-5 | ISBN (PBK) 978-1-951414-09-2 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.36284/celelon.oa5>

Subjects: LCSH: English language – Rhetoric – Study and teaching | Business writing

Classification: LCC PE1404.W75 2022 | DDC 808.066

CHAPTER 7

BRIDGING ACADEMIC AND WORKPLACE WRITING

Insights from Employers

Jeffrey Saerys-Foy, Quinnipiac University, United States

Laurie Ann Britt-Smith, College of the Holy Cross, United States

Zan Walker-Goncalves, Franklin Pierce University, United States

Lauren M. Sardi, Quinnipiac University, United States

Why do many employers report that college graduates are not ready for workplace writing (e.g., Hart Research Associates/AAC&U 2015; NACE 2017)? Ethnographic research in writing studies and technical/professional communications (e.g., Dias et al. 1999; Beaufort 2008; Kramer-Simpson 2018) reveals differences between college and workplace writing that can make them seem “worlds apart” (Dias et al. 1999). To illustrate, consider Beaufort’s analysis of “Tim’s” experiences with writing lab notebooks in college and the workplace. Tim found that his lab notebooks felt “manufactured” for a grade (116), while writing at work “became a more meaningful tool both for accomplishing work and for personal reflection” (129). This example seems to highlight how writing in college and the workplace are different discourse communities—networks in which communication is structured by shared knowledge, goals, and norms (Beaufort 2008). In college, Tim’s writing is structured by his goal of earning a grade, but at work it becomes a tool for him to reflect on his impact through his work. In this chapter, we will question the characterization of workplace and college writing as “worlds apart.” Drawing on research in writing studies and responses

from a survey that we conducted with employers across sectors of industry, we will highlight the ways that college and workplace discourse communities converge and diverge, creating challenges and opportunities to foster writing workplace readiness.

Research Methods

To characterize workplace discourse communities, we sent an online survey through the career centers of three institutions—Quinnipiac University, Franklin Pierce University, and Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Although all these schools are in the northeast of the United States, they vary by size and student population. Ninety-one employers from over a dozen sectors (e.g., finance and investment, arts and entertainment) completed open-ended (e.g., “What are differences between writing in the workplace and writing in college?”) and closed-ended questions (e.g., “How often does writing involve collaboration?”) about a range of topics, including how employers assess the writing proficiency of applicants and how writing unfolds in the workplace. Survey questions and sample responses can be viewed on the “[Employer Writing Survey and Supplementary Data](#)” files in the online resources for this book. Readers interested in collecting their own data can email Jeffrey Saerys-Foy to get an editable Google Forms version of our survey.

To analyze responses to open-ended questions, we searched for emergent themes to create a coding scheme so that we could tally responses for each question. We read responses individually and generated categories, which we discussed as a group and iterated until we agreed on a coding scheme, but when we tried to apply the coding scheme, we ran into disagreements that we could not resolve. We represent different disciplines and therefore different discourse communities (two authors from rhetoric and composition, one from sociology, and one from cognitive psychology), and we realized that we were working from different assumptions about writing. For example, when analyzing responses to a question about what skills employers look for in applicants, some of us coded clarity and audience separately, while others argued that clarity is always

defined relative to a specific audience and, as such, implicitly invokes rhetorical awareness. As a result, we were unable to construct distinct categories to use to quantify responses for individual open-ended responses. Nonetheless, we agreed on broad themes in responses across questions.

As our goal was to characterize the discourse communities of college and workplace writing, we will organize our chapter around the knowledge domains from Beaufort's (2008) model of discourse communities:

1. Discourse community (goals, roles, and norms)
2. Rhetorical exigencies (i.e., audiences and purposes)
3. Genres
4. Writing process

For each domain, we will report results from our survey to characterize the workplace writing discourse community and then draw upon research from writing studies to characterize the college writing discourse community. Beaufort also includes a fifth domain, subject matter knowledge (e.g., relevant precedents for a legal case). Because subject matter knowledge is so dependent on specific workplaces and knowledge domains, we will not consider it here as we are looking for patterns across workplaces and domains.

Workplace Writing Survey Results

Discourse Community

Workplaces have an overarching goal of turning out a product or a service, which employees accomplish through specific tasks (e.g., writing emails, taking notes) to accomplish smaller sub goals (e.g., establishing a relationship with a client). Across multiple open-ended questions, employers sometimes referred to these goals, confirming the practical nature of workplace writing:

“Our writing is submitted to federal Judges who often amend supervision conditions as a result of our recommendations/reports.”

“We’re writing short, strong sentences to help sell merchandise.”

A further indicator of the practical nature of workplace writing is that 50% of our respondents indicated that writing is often, very often, or always associated with important outcomes (i.e., high stakes; see table 7.1).

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very often	Always
Collaboration	4%	26%	37%	13%	18%	1%
Feedback and revision	1%	22%	31%	15%	20%	10%
Template	3%	13%	37%	27%	17%	2%
Graphs and tables	10%	24%	33%	13%	11%	9%
Reporting numbers	6%	9%	23%	27%	21%	14%
Visual elements	11%	23%	22%	21%	14%	8%
External audience	1%	11%	10%	18%	30%	29%
Internal audience	4%	8%	18%	22%	24%	24%
High stakes	9%	19%	23%	20%	19%	11%
Low stakes	6%	9%	24%	17%	28%	17%

Table 7.1. How Often Workplace Writing Involves Each Element

Across all open-ended questions in the survey, employers’ responses often focused on correctness (i.e., spelling, punctuation, and grammar). Employers also frequently mentioned clarity and brevity. We interpret these responses as indicating that many employers accept the myth of transience—the belief that writing is a generalizable skill, transferable across contexts (Russell 2002). Consistent with this idea, we found many responses to be vague, using terms such as “professional” (e.g., “clarity, logical thinking,

professional appropriateness”) and “business” (e.g., “business writing”), indicating they felt like these terms refer to a set of shared norms for workplace writing that are transparent to others.

In contrast to the practical nature of workplace writing, the overarching goal of college writing is to support and assess learning (Dias et al. 1999; Melzer 2014). Like our respondents, many professors subscribe to the myth of transience, focusing on correctness when providing information. This focus sends a clear signal to students, who likewise judge others negatively for making grammatical errors even more than conceptual errors (Johnson, Wilson, and Roscoe 2017) and who focus on fixing mechanical and usage errors rather than attending to conceptual issues when revising (Dave and Russell 2010).

Rhetorical Exigencies: Audiences and Purposes

Though we did not directly ask about rhetorical exigencies, employers’ responses often demonstrated a nascent awareness of these exigencies. Some respondents specifically mentioned the need to adapt writing to different audiences (“In the workplace, the audience is far broader than the professor. . . . Being able to tailor the writing to the audience is essential.”). Others tacitly invoked the need to consider audience (e.g., “Tone . . . writing can come across the wrong way very easily.”) or referenced the intended impact of writing (e.g., “Workplace writing often requires the ability to clearly state the purpose, key points, implications, and next steps to aid a decision or action.”). For our respondents, workplace writing involves writing to a variety of audiences—internal and external—making it important to be able to tailor writing for specific audiences. The focus on correctness may also reflect awareness of audience. Professionals place a stronger emphasis on correctness when writing for external audiences, as audiences may judge writers as being careless, poorly educated, and poor communicators when they violate norms of correctness (Gubala, Larson, and Melonçon 2020).

Professors are nearly always the audience for students’ writing (Melzer 2014). Professors come from different disciplinary discourse

communities, write for many different purposes, and apply different disciplinary norms for writing, but they most often assign writing with one purpose: to be informative. Informative assignments reinforce content for students and allow professors to evaluate students' content knowledge. Even when students vary the rhetorical exigencies of writing (e.g., writing for a different audience, such as a coworker), students often ignore these exigencies and focus on displaying knowledge for a grade, reinforcing the false belief that "writing is a generic skill that, once learned, becomes a 'one size fits all' intellectual garb" (Beaufort 2008, 10). Thus, college writing often reinforces the myth of transience, a filter that shapes employer perceptions of writing and their expectations for new graduates/employees.

Genres

Given the multiplicity of goals that employees need to accomplish, forms of writing vary substantially within and across workplaces. When asked what types of writing workers engage in, employers mentioned a wide range of genres, including memos, grant applications, requests to the court, and technical manuals, with emails, notes, and social media being the most common responses across workplaces. Furthermore, at times employees must incorporate visuals, tables, figures, and data into their writing (see table 7.1).

Writing in these genres requires that workers be proficient in multiple computer programs: 71% of respondents use at least one Microsoft software (i.e., Word, Excel, PowerPoint), with 25% choosing a Google equivalent and 27% reporting using other programs, including webtools (e.g., Mailchimp and WordPress), social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), and discipline-specific programs (e.g., Maximo and Rehab Optima).

Like employees, students engage with a variety of genres, and must increasingly use a variety of digital tools. Melzer (2014) found that professors assign "lab reports, executive summaries, book reviews, ethnographies, feasibility reports, essay exams, abstracts, annotated bibliographies, editorials, case studies, court briefs, company profiles, press releases, literature reviews—the list is truly

extensive” (41– 42). As with the workplace, students must increasingly use a variety of technologies to communicate in a variety of forms (e.g., podcasts, videos; Knobel and Lankshear 2014). Although college and workplace writing differ at the level of goal or outcome, both require students to write in a range of genres using a variety of tools.

Writing Process

The way that people write in the workplace also varies considerably. Most employers indicated that at times writing involves rounds of feedback and revision (see table 7.1). Some employers commented that writing is often “time sensitive” and “on the fly,” providing little opportunity for drafts, feedback, and revision. Few respondents indicated that writing is never or always collaborative (see table 7.1). The most common responses were sometimes (37%) or rarely (26%). These numbers indicate that in most workplaces both collaborative and individual writing is the norm. A similar pattern emerged for using templates.

The emphasis in college writing is on assessing the individual student. While some types of writing (e.g., essay tests, in-class exploratory writing) require students to write extemporaneously, most formal assignments provide students with ample time to compose. However, even with generous deadlines, many professors assign writing without requiring drafts or providing feedback on drafts, discussing examples of good writing in class, or providing opportunities for informal, exploratory writing that allows students to prepare for the assignment (Addison and McGee 2010). Students often do not use effective composition techniques (e.g., prewriting, drafting, revising for content) because they can get a satisfactory grade without doing so (Wardle 2007). According to our results, employers perceive that college graduates continue to write in the workplace the way that they wrote in college, and that they are slow to adapt to workplace writing.

Knowledge in the Workplace and College Discourse Community

When looking at employers' responses, we face a paradox: they believe in the myth of transience while, at the same time, insist employees adapt their writing to meet the needs of the situation. This tension reflects the tacit nature of knowledge about writing in workplace discourse. Tacit knowledge often takes the form of "knowing how," practicing until it becomes ingrained and taken for granted, below the level of awareness (Smith 2001). Through practice and experience, employees learn to navigate different writing situations within their workplace, internalizing the norms. Thus, employees who fit Rice's (2015) characterization of para-experts have "experiential, embodied, and tacit knowledge that does not translate into the vocabulary or skills of disciplinary expertise" (119), whilst lacking awareness of doing so. This allows employers to believe the myth of transience while expecting employees to write adaptively.

Likewise, both professors and students navigate a range of writing genres (e.g., email, PowerPoint slides, academic writing) for a range of audiences and yet, like the respondents in our survey, research indicates that many believe the myth of transience. As with professionals, both professors and students are likely relying on tacit knowledge and routines, making it difficult for them to adapt to new contexts. For college writers to become adaptive, they need the opportunity to reflect on their writing (e.g., audience, goals, linguistic choices) and processes (e.g., drafting, soliciting feedback) so they can gain awareness of and make better use of their tacit knowledge (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015).

Pedagogical Implications for Teaching and Mentoring Student Writers

Although it is unrealistic to believe college writing instruction can prepare students for all the types of writing they will encounter in the workplace, successful curricular approaches exist. Colleges can best prepare students by providing them with the conceptual tools

needed to analyze the situational exigencies of writing, as well as opportunities to make intentional rhetorical choices and reflect, fostering metacognition (Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015). We offer some strategies for accomplishing these goals.

Goals, Roles, and Norms

One strategy is to design authentic assignments. Some employers suggested using authentic, goal-based assignments (e.g., “Have students execute applications-based projects from real-world current examples”), which can be effective (e.g., Peltola 2018). However, to make such assignments work, teachers must scaffold students to reflect upon and address the rhetorical exigencies of the assignment, otherwise students may focus on demonstrating knowledge for the professor (Dias et al. 1999).

The most salient convergence between professors and employers is the focus on correctness, which reinforces an insidious and pervasive norm in privileging English used by white, educated individuals at the expense of historically marginalized groups (e.g., Condon and Young 2017; Haas and Eble 2018). Within this context, other forms of English, such as African American English, are labeled “a detriment or barrier in school and professional contexts” (Young 2020, 17). If instead, goal-based assignments are reframed within an antiracist context, more languages become a resource to achieving a goal (Young 2020). Such a framing supports opportunities for students to engage in code-meshing, “which is blending dialects or blending Englishes” (Young 2020, 6). Allowing students to experiment with different forms of English encourages students to learn “to use the full range of their rhetorical skills for their purposes and audiences and help them revise, reason, and review their—and not our—rhetorical choices” (Young 2020, 16), promoting rhetorical awareness.

Positioning professors as the sole arbiters of grades not only privileges what Asao Inoue calls the “white status quo” (Lerner 2018), it fails to provide opportunities for students to develop metacognitive knowledge to assess and regulate their own writing. Inoue and others suggest using labor-based grading contracts, which involves

a process of negotiating grading criteria with students based on the quantity of the work they produce and having students reflect on their writing throughout the process (Inoue 2019; for a discussion of other grading alternatives, see Tchudi 1997, Nilson 2015, and Blum 2020). These suggestions may seem at odds with suggestions by some respondents (e.g., “Stop accepting mediocrity and recognizing people just showing up. Demand excellence!”). However, contract grading done well demands excellence while upholding equity and inclusion, going beyond just rewarding effort.

Genres and Rhetoric

Writing in college and the workplace both provide opportunities for people to engage with a variety of genres and audiences, but in both cases they may not receive sufficient support to do so. Unless students understand the rhetorical nature of writing, they may write the same way across situations (e.g., different classes, different workplace situations) rather than adapt to the rhetorical exigencies of each situation. Some composition professors have advocated teaching students to use conceptual tools to analyze the rhetorical exigencies of assignments (e.g., Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015). These approaches are only likely to be successful if instructors support students in courses beyond first-year composition. To do this, professors need support in designing assignments that require students to grapple with different rhetorical exigencies (e.g., different goals, audiences, genres, as Adler-Kassner and Wardle 2015 suggest) and provide students with opportunities to analyze these rhetorical exigencies, as well as engage in self-reflection on their rhetorical choices. Doing so helps students cultivate a mindful approach to writing that allows them to make intentional choices and assess their own writing.

Writing Process

Unless students are required to do so, few are likely to use effective writing practices. Professors can provide support for students to engage in these practices by incorporating drafts into grading contracts, including opportunities for students to reflect, give and

receive feedback, and make revisions. Students can learn to assess their own writing by engaging in peer review and self-evaluation (for best practices on self and peer assessment, see Panadero, Jonsson, and Strijbos 2016). Additionally, timed writing assignments that simulate workplace writing situations with quick turnarounds, as well as opportunities to write collaboratively, enable students to gain experience valued in the workplace. Likewise, assigning short summaries or executive summaries for longer papers encourages students to be concise. Finally, assigning a cover letter or critical reflection in which students demonstrate the writerly choices they made in completing the task and state why they made those choices in relation to their audience is critical to transferring writing skills and rhetorical knowledge from one task and environment to another.

Technology

Our survey suggests that employers primarily use Microsoft software (e.g., Word, PowerPoint) and their Google equivalents to write. Despite being “digital natives,” students often have a limited knowledge of these tools and how to use their many features (Kirschner and De Bruyckere 2017), such as how to organize files and record audio in PowerPoint. Additionally, access to the internet and computers is not evenly distributed. In the United States, white individuals have higher levels of access to the internet and computers than Black and Hispanic individuals (United States Census Bureau 2017). Thus, it is important for professors to support students’ proficiency in these technologies to promote equitable technological literacy and ensure workplace preparedness.

Administrative Implications for Program Directors and Other University Administrators

We have proposed strategies to increase college graduates’ workplace writing readiness. These strategies are unlikely to be effective if implemented solely in composition courses or writing intensive courses, as students are unlikely to transfer them across contexts unless they need to do so across the curriculum. Though professors across the curriculum do not need to become composition experts,

they must become aware of the norms that shape writing in their classroom so that they can adequately support students. For professors to use these strategies, they need development opportunities to make their tacit knowledge explicit, and to develop assignments that integrate goals, audience, and genres. Program directors and other college administrators must foster these curricular changes to ensure that students are gaining experience writing in different contexts and reflecting on their experience.

Schools may consider using writing portfolios to assess students' writing proficiency. Students' samples from different classes over time can illustrate whether they are adapting their writing across classes, as well as track their development over time. With these samples, schools can assess how effectively they are supporting writing across the curriculum towards workplace writing and adjust as needed. For writing transfer to be effective within the curriculum, there must be multiple opportunities for students to practice and reflect on their writing choices across classes in different contexts. They need the opportunity to make the often-invisible moves of effective writing visible. To navigate successfully from academic to workplace discourse, students need a compass as well as a map of the territory. The knowledge students learn about the four directions (technology; writing process; genres and rhetoric; roles, goals, and norms) will help them "read" the map of their particular workplaces and make thoughtful writerly choices as they become valuable workplace writers.

References

- Addison, Joanne, and Sharon James McGee. 2015. "Writing in High School/Writing in College: Research Trends and Future Directions." *College Composition and Communication* 62 (1): 147–79.
- Adler-Kassner, Linda, and Elizabeth Wardle. 2015. *Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.

- Beaufort, Anne. 2008. *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Blum, Susan Debra, ed. 2020. *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press.
- Condon, Frankie, and Vershawn Ashanti Young, eds. 2017. *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*. Boulder, CO: WAC Clearinghouse.
- Dave, Anish M., and David R. Russell. 2010. "Drafting and Revision Using Word Processing by Undergraduate Student Writers: Changing Conceptions and Practices." *Research in the Teaching of English* 44 (4): 406–34.
- Dias, Patrick, Aviva Freedman, Peter Medway, and Anthony Par. 1999. *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*. Mahwah, NJ: Taylor and Francis.
- Gubala, Carolyn, Kara Larson, and Lisa Melonçon. 2020. "Do Writing Errors Bother Professionals? An Analysis of the Most Bothersome Errors and How the Writer's Ethos Is Affected." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 34 (3): 250–86.
- Haas, Angela M., and Michelle F. Eble, eds. 2018. *Key Theoretical Frameworks: Teaching Technical Communication in the Twenty-First Century*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- Hart Research Associates/AAC&U (Association of American Colleges and Universities). 2015. "Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success." <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2015employerstudentsurvey.pdf>.
- Inoue, Asao B. 2019. *Labor-based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. Boulder, CO: WAC Clearinghouse.
- Johnson, Adam C., Joshua Wilson, and Rod D. Roscoe. 2017. "College Student Perceptions of Writing Errors, Text Quality, and Author Characteristics." *Assessing Writing* 34: 72–87.

- Kirschner, Paul A., and Pedro De Bruyckere. 2017. "The Myths of the Digital Native and the Multitasker." *Teaching and Teacher Education* 67: 135–42.
- Knobel, Michele, and Colin Lankshear. 2014. "Studying New Literacies." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 58 (2): 97–101
- Kramer-Simpson, Elisabeth. 2018. "Moving from Student to Professional: Industry Mentors and Academic Internship Coordinators Supporting Intern Learning in the Workplace." *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication* 48 (1): 81–103.
- Lerner, Neal. 2018. "WAC Journal Interview of Asao B. Inoue." *The WAC Journal* 29 (1): 112–18.
- Melzer, Dan. 2014. *Assignments Across the Curriculum: A National Study of College Writing*. Logan, UT: Utah State University Press.
- NACE (National Association of Colleges and Employers). 2017. "Job Outlook 2017." <https://www.nacweb.org/store/2017/job-outlook-2017/>.
- Nilson, Linda. 2015. *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.
- Panadero, Ernesto, Anders Jonsson, and Jan-Willem Strijbos. 2016. "Scaffolding Self-Regulated Learning through Self-Assessment and Peer Assessment: Guidelines for Classroom Implementation." In *Assessment for Learning: Meeting the Challenge of Implementation*, edited by Dany Laveault and Linda Allal, 311–26. New York, NY: Springer Cham.
- Peltola, Arlene. 2018. "The Classroom as Think Tank: Small Groups, Authentic Exercises, and Instructional Scaffolding in an Advanced Writing Course." *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 30 (2): 322–33.
- Rice, Jenny. 2015. "Para-Expertise, Tacit Knowledge, and Writing Problems." *College English* 78 (2): 117–38.
- Russell, David R. 2002. *Writing in the Academic Disciplines: A Curricular History*. Carbondale, IL: SIU Press.

- Smith, Elizabeth A. 2001. "The Role of Tacit and Explicit Knowledge in the Workplace." *Journal of Knowledge Management* 5 (4): 311–21.
- Tchudi, Stephen, and NCTE Committee on Alternatives to Grading Student Writing. 1997. *Alternatives to Grading Student Writing*. National Council of Teachers of English. <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/ncte/tchudi/>.
- United States Census Bureau. 2017. "The Digital Divide: Percentage of Households by Broadband Internet Subscription, Computer Type, Race and Hispanic Origin." September 11, 2017. <https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2017/comm/internet.html>.
- Wardle, Elizabeth. 2007. "Understanding 'Transfer' from FYC: Preliminary Results of a Longitudinal Study." *Writing Program Administration* 31 (1-2): 65.
- Young, Vershawn Ashanti. 2020. "Black Lives Matter in Academic Spaces: Three Lessons for Critical Literacy." *Journal of College Reading and Learning* 50 (1): 5–18.