

Writing Beyond the University

Preparing Lifelong Learners
for Lifewide Writing

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and Paula Rosinski*

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CHAPTER 8

NAVIGATING WORKPLACE WRITING AS A NEW PROFESSIONAL

The Roles of Workplace Environment,
Writerly Identity, and Mentoring and Support

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For many new professionals, the transition to the workplace is messy and challenging (Anson and Forsberg 1990; Dias et al. 1999; Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2013; Schneider and Andre 2005; Spilka 1993). But this transition also offers opportunities for these individuals to develop both professional and writerly identities. Many factors may influence identity development, and in this chapter, we focus on the workplace environment and its role in supporting early-career professionals as they negotiate workplace expectations and develop identities as both writers and professionals. We also examine connections among the workplace environment, writerly confidence and identity, and mentoring and support.

Gere and colleagues' (2019) research on developing writers in higher education identifies behaviors, needs, and preferences of college writers. As the researchers show, these writers seek out models, affirmation from instructors, and a safe space to share or submit writing. The early-career professionals in our study demonstrated similar behaviors in their workplaces. We know from transfer

research (e.g., Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014; Yancey et al. 2018) that the contexts between which transfer can occur can be vital to a writer's success. Our study suggests that early-career writers may need workplace contexts that facilitate knowledge transfer. These writers may also benefit from the kinds of support that helped them succeed in college: mentoring; opportunities to build confidence and expertise with feedback, support, and affirmation; and a workplace environment that facilitates these relationships and opportunities.

Given the importance of supportive structures in the workplace, we conclude by offering recommendations for faculty and programs as they help students prepare to transition into workplace contexts. Our research and recommendations draw on previous work in the transfer of writing knowledge and practice (e.g., Beaufort 2007; Downs and Wardle 2007; Nowacek 2011; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014) and writing in the workplace (e.g., Blakeslee 1997; Johnson-Eilola and Selber 2013; Spilka 1993; Winsor 1996), and they parallel more recent work that examines the experiences of alumni in the workplace (e.g., Alexander, Lunsford, and Whithaus 2020; Gere 2019).

Overview of Methods

Our IRB-approved study included a survey and two in-depth interviews, conducted between October 2019 and April 2021, involving early-career professionals (0–5 years in their current position) who are alumni from five US institutions—two in the Midwest, and one each in the Northwest, Southeast, and Northeast Mid-Atlantic regions. These participants, initially totaling more than fifty but reduced to just over thirty as the study progressed through the pandemic, represented a wide range of industries, experiences, and educational backgrounds. In this chapter, we feature eight of our participants (see table 8.1) to illustrate the importance of our findings related to workplace environment, writerly identity, and mentoring and support.

Participant	Position/workplace context	Writing experience in context
Santiago	Writer/translator for a university office of inclusive excellence	Strong writerly identity; relied on supervisor and past experiences to develop writing approaches
Jill	Floor nurse at a major health system in a large metropolitan area	Confident as a nurse and as a writer within nursing (with both charting and academic writing); willing to seek help
Rae Ann	Data analyst for a center providing research-based quality improvement systems to support and ensure the quality of youth programs	Not confident as a writer; writerly identity not strong, even with positive feedback from supervisors; expressed desire to become better at writing
Meg	Marketing and communications at a telecommunication company	Confident in part due to strong mentoring experience; relied on collaboration with supervisor
Allie	Materials scientist for a large federal organization	Structured mentoring; environment encouraged seeking feedback
Joseph	Senior research analyst for a state organization	Not confident; writerly identity not strong; lack of mentoring and feedback contributed to less confidence and knowledge when approaching writing
Liam	Applications engineer conducting failure analysis for a technology company	Lack of workplace mentoring; confident writer; developed own approaches to writing
Teresa	Two positions: nurse and marketing coordinator for a community college	Strong writerly identity; lack of affirmation in one workplace context negatively affected confidence

Table 8.1. Participants' Workplace Contexts and Experiences

Findings

In this section, we explore the influence of the workplace environment and its effects on early-career professionals as they navigated different workplace contexts and experiences. We also explore the influence of individuals' confidence and writerly identity on their experiences with workplace writing and with mentoring and support.

Impact of Workplace Environments

Study participants worked in a variety of environments that contributed to how they developed knowledge in the workplace and also impacted their identities as writers. In these environments, some participants struggled to find any support, others found ways to access support, and others had structured support opportunities. Of those who struggled to find support, Teresa, employed as a nurse by an agency providing in-home care, functioned outside of an established workplace environment since her workplace was patients' homes. Her supervisor was her sole source of feedback and provided it only to correct her writing or to inform her that its inadequacy necessitated revision. Without any workspace for regular interactions or opportunities to observe peers or writing models, Teresa had no collaborative support or frame of reference to understand the culture and practices of her workplace or its writing.

Liam and Joseph's workplace environments also affected their experiences on the job, but in different ways. A confident writer with a strong writerly identity, Liam worked in a fast-paced environment without structured mentoring, requiring him to develop his own approaches to writing. In contrast, Joseph lacked both confidence and knowledge, and he had difficulty navigating the challenges that came with a lack of structure. In addition, Joseph's workplace had significant turnover. In this environment, he not only lacked direct mentoring and structured support but also had no access to experienced coworkers. This sink-or-swim environment made it challenging for Joseph to learn workplace expectations, to develop confidence, and to find reassurance in his writing.

In contrast to these sink-or-swim workplace contexts, other participants worked within more structured and supportive environments. Jill, a nurse, was required to participate in a residency program for new nurses at the hospital at which she worked that included structured research-based writing tasks and supportive feedback. Jill also was mentored by more experienced nurses, and these workplace opportunities for support—along with Jill’s disposition to ask for help—bolstered her confidence.

Like Jill, Allie was able to exchange ideas with her supervisors and participate in formalized mentoring programs. She remarked, “People are really good about giving feedback and explaining. . . . The environment is so safe in terms of like learning, and like people are always very excited if you ask them for advice or, like, guidance.” The safety of and support in Allie’s workplace environment helped her thrive. As a multiracial woman in a STEM field, she had experienced situations that made her feel like an outsider. Yet in this workplace, she found opportunities to receive feedback, mentoring, and support that helped her grow as a writer and as a team contributor. Whenever Allie wrote, for example, she could always expect feedback and access to templates.

Others (Meg and Santiago, in particular) lacked the structured workplace environments Jill and Allie experienced but had supervisors they were able to trust for feedback and with whom they could work closely. While their mentoring experiences were not formal or structured, their relationships with their supervisors still provided a regular resource. Meg, for example, trusted her supervisor to make sure her ideas were sound before she produced or shared her writing. Santiago’s supervisor was an ongoing ally he relied on to develop approaches consistent with his strong writerly identity that also met the expectations of readers outside their office: “She was great with giving advice and . . . also with her knowledge of the school that I didn’t have with the higher ups and stuff.”

What these participants’ experiences demonstrate is that the workplace—with its various cues, structures, and relationships (or the lack thereof)—can affect how new workplace professionals develop

as writers and respond to the writing they are asked to do in their jobs.

Role of Identity

Workplace environments clearly influence the writing confidence and experiences of new professionals. Additional factors in their success included confidence in their writing abilities and their writerly identities. Our participants who identified strongly as writers—in particular, Santiago, Meg, Liam, Allie, and Jill—were able to call on that identity, even if that identity occasionally created conflict. For example, Santiago’s identity as a creative writer initially put him into conflict with an outside editor, who had to approve and could ask for revisions of his work. Santiago characterized his interactions with that external editor as combative. He felt compelled to defend his emphasis on personal voice over what he described as corporate branding. He explains:

That was the first tension I had with . . . the person that was editing the website because it was “too poetic” for the website, it wasn’t “on brand.” So that was one of the battles I fought . . . on voice. You know, how do I preserve this voice and not make it just a cookie cutter Q&A? So I had to . . . accommodate it.

While Santiago initially balked when his writerly identity was stymied, he found outlets for his creative writing outside the workplace. Rather than allowing the branded workplace writing voice to conflict with his more creative identity, Santiago learned to approach and embrace the different writing contexts separately.

In contrast to Santiago, other participants did not identify as strongly as writers. For example, Rae Ann, working in data analytics, did not see herself as a strong writer. She commented, “I wish I could be a writer. I always fantasize about the idea of it.” She described herself as “probably a mid-level writer, but with an entry-level knowledge on the actual writing.” She also saw herself more as a receiver of feedback than as someone who composes original documents. Importantly, her insistence on not being a writer

seemed grounded in her self-characterization as a filler of blanks in templates, which she did not see as writing. Although her supervisor praised her writing skill in performance reviews, Rae Ann did not embrace an identity as a strong workplace writer, demonstrating that successful writing does not necessarily equate with a positive writerly identity.

Conversely, someone who does identify strongly as a writer may not always be successful in transferring their writing skills to workplace writing tasks. Teresa, the in-home nurse, also had an MFA and wrote creatively but expressed that she was “slow and methodical” with her workplace writing. She found the urgency of writing notes and updating care plans challenging, citing urgency and haste as what she disliked in nursing generally but especially in the writing. Her meticulous and methodical approach to drafting, combined with her identity as a creative writer, interfered with her ability to write in the ways she was being asked in her nursing position. She shared that her writing had been mentioned in nursing performance evaluations as an area needing improvement, an assessment she could not reconcile with her writerly identity.

Role of Mentoring and Support

For all the participants, their writerly identities—coupled with the circumstances of and relationships within their workplaces—played a role in their confidence and in their effectiveness in writing. For Santiago, his supervisor’s support as an advocate for his choice to include personal voice in his professional writing was crucial to his confidence and success.

Like Santiago, Meg was a confident writer with varied experiences who also relied on mentoring to bolster her confidence in tackling her workplace writing. And like Santiago, Meg relied heavily on collaboration with her supervisor to generate content and “translating what they [subject matter experts] said into modern speech.” Although she started her job feeling “very” confident about her writing, she acknowledged leaning on support structures within her company from the start, especially her supervisor’s input, for her writing and design ideas.

Similarly, Jill expressed a great deal of confidence in two types of writing at work: charting, the primary writing she does as a nurse, and research writing, a requirement of her residency. Jill noted that an important goal of her residency program was to provide mentoring to new nurses: “It helped me to be able to talk to other nurses about just starting out and the struggles you have with starting any kind of a new job.” Jill described herself as thoughtful and deliberate about writing, placing a high value on doing it well and being unafraid to seek help. She exuded confidence in her writing while also recognizing that it could always improve.

Teresa’s experiences with mentoring in two different workplaces—in-home nursing and marketing—provided a direct connection between her confidence and level of success. In nursing, she said, her challenge was balancing jargon and “charting style,” as she referred to it, with clear communication. She aimed to avoid the dreaded calls from her supervisor. She said, “I know when her name comes up on my phone that there’s going to be something I didn’t do well enough, and ninety-nine percent of the time it’s about something I wrote, not something I did.” Receiving feedback only when something was wrong and getting no affirmation of any success eroded Teresa’s confidence. In contrast, collaborating with her supervisor in her marketing position provided affirmation and increased her confidence. Teresa reported the marketing writing as much more enjoyable than her nursing writing, noting the ability to work at her own pace. She described writing this way as a “collaborative, all-for-one approach,” which also boosted her confidence.

Even confident writers need and want mentoring and support. While he identified as a confident writer, Liam noted that his confidence dipped when he was not supported in learning the writing practices in his workplace. Liam also discussed how feedback on his writing often came indirectly—from a lack of action or response—rather than explicitly and directly, thus communicating that his writing was ineffective. Ultimately, Liam was confident and believed he could effectively determine how to write in new situations, but other writers struggled in situations like these. For

example, Joseph explained his experience this way: “There’s been no feedback system at all. It’s just do your job and move onto the next thing. . . . I would have liked more feedback in terms of how people do communicate and figuring out the writing styles that most people find appropriate.”

For Joseph, who lacked confidence in his writing ability and who, like Rae Ann, did not possess a strong writerly identity, the lack of mentoring and feedback meant that he struggled to learn the writing expected of him and had to rely on his own judgement. With more mentoring, he might have become more confident and knowledgeable about how to write in his workplace.

We also found that writers’ willingness to ask for help connected in some cases to their confidence and perceptions of themselves as writers. For example, Rae Ann often felt uncomfortable asking for feedback, believing that she should just know how to do her job:

I knew that having the relationships with my boss was important to having those one-on-one conversations about the content. . . . I made sure I had the time with him to talk through the white papers and get what I needed. . . . And the purpose was so that I could do my job well enough so that they didn’t have to fix it. . . . I feel like—it’s my job, I’m getting paid to do a job. I should be able to do it. I still will ask for support, but I would say I’m least comfortable with that part of it.

When writers feel reluctant to ask for help or feel that doing so may negatively influence perceptions of their competence, they may be unable to cultivate and/or activate the benefits of mentoring. This, in turn, may affect their ability to successfully call upon, develop, and potentially transfer writing knowledge from their university experiences to their workplace contexts.

Recommendations

For our participants, even those in similar positions, no two workplace contexts were alike. But across all workplace contexts,

writers benefited from environments that provided the support, mentoring, and resources they needed to complete the writing they were assigned. Much like the conditions necessary for transfer (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014; Yancey et al. 2018), certain conditions may impact writing confidence and writers' perceptions of success: opportunities to build confidence and expertise with feedback, support, and affirmation; a workplace environment that facilitates these relationships and opportunities; and a willingness and ability to seek out relationships and opportunities to acquire self-efficacy in relation to writing.

As our recommendations below suggest, academic programs and faculty might do more to help students develop knowledge and aptitudes for adapting to varying professional contexts. We recommend 1) providing multiple, scaffolded opportunities for immersion in disciplinary genres; 2) providing and also helping students understand the importance of seeking meaningful feedback through mentoring; and 3) teaching and providing opportunities for students to engage in reflection, especially in relation to their knowledge of writing and its uses across disciplinary and professional contexts.

By enacting these recommendations, writing programs and instructors can help students develop a conceptual framework of writing knowledge that they can use to understand different contexts they might experience. They might also be able to use that framework to transfer that knowledge from one context to the next (Beaufort 2007; Nowacek 2011; Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014). We know that students bring prior knowledge and experiences that both help and constrain their ability to adapt to new writing situations (Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak 2014; Taczak and Robertson 2016). We also know that experienced writers who adopt a novice mindset in approaching new writing tasks are not as limited by previous expectations (Sommers and Saltz 2004). And findings from our research point to the importance of mentoring and other supportive relationships in helping professionals acquire confidence with workplace writing tasks. As our participants illustrate, the role of mentoring and feedback in building confidence

and an identity as a workplace writer is often crucial for early-career professionals. Through this mentoring and feedback, they are able to develop new and repurpose existing writing knowledge for appropriate use in different contexts.

As Adler-Kassner and Wardle (2015, 2021) point out, knowledge-making practices in the disciplines need to be named and better understood so that the knowledge and practices that stem from those practices become more explicit to writers, enabling their exploration and experience with those practices. To implement this recommendation, writing courses might explore both differences and similarities across disciplinary writing, capstone courses might assign research into writing in different disciplines, and faculty in majors can help students develop knowledge of writing as a means of communicating appropriately for different audiences and contexts within their disciplines, more aligned with what they'll experience beyond college. To that end, scholarship in writing development supports students having repeated and scaffolded opportunities to engage with the genres and conventions of different disciplines (Bazerman et al. 2018). The more students in all disciplines gain exposure to and practice with a range of genres and disciplinary writing contexts throughout college, the more effectively they might cultivate the flexibility that our participants found to be so important for their workplace writing.

Finally, how students are assessed, and the feedback they are given in response to their writing, can also be significant. Students benefit from scaffolded, meaningful feedback that allows them to grow as writers (Downs 2015; Ferris 2018; Sommers 1980). Such feedback can also help students become active, reflective writing practitioners (Schön 1983; Yancey 1998). By providing students with repeated opportunities to receive, analyze, and act on different kinds of feedback, instructors can help students become reflective writing practitioners able to plan for, seek, and respond to feedback once they enter contexts beyond college (Taczak and Robertson 2016). A reflective mindset is also essential for developing a writerly

identity that facilitates confidence and flexibility when encountering new workplace writing tasks.

While our recommendations can help prepare students to be agents of their own success in professional contexts, this agency necessitates the understanding that they can continue to grow on the job. They can do this by seeking feedback and by understanding their roles as writers within their particular workplace. It would be helpful, for example, for early-career professionals to understand (as Santiago and Teresa did) the difference between when they might draw on their own personal languages and writing identities and when they might be asked by their workplace to write in particular ways, as Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) suggested for first-year writers moving into other academic contexts.

Understanding writers' early-career experiences might identify pedagogical approaches that can help prepare fledgling workplace writers for those early-career experiences and potentially facilitate the transfer of writing knowledge from academic to workplace contexts. This research, in other words, can strengthen connections between the teaching of writing in college and writers' experiences with workplace writing tasks and the contexts in which those tasks are needed.

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