

Spotlight

Stop Drowning in Writing Projects

In the Information Age, excellent writing is a necessity for all professions — mathematicians, economists, engineers, scientists, and researchers, to name a few. Professionals' reputations — and the reputations of the organizations for which they work — depend on their ability to

- write with clarity, precision, and objectivity — but in a way that is also lively and interesting.
- write with the reader in mind. For more information, see “One Key to Grant-Writing Success” in this issue of *The Write Way*.
- avoid jargon (a major issue in technical content).

Solid writing skills aren't a given

Ideally, today's professionals learn to write in college. That's the assumption that many organizations, associations, and employers make.

Unfortunately, a college, or advanced, degree doesn't necessarily guarantee solid writing skills. While technical and scientific professionals may have great expertise and be highly knowledgeable, many simply lack the ability to convey that expertise and knowledge such that it's usable, coherent, and concise. The sad truth is that universities often don't emphasize the need for college graduates to write well; consequently, many college students graduate without having the tools they need to write effectively.

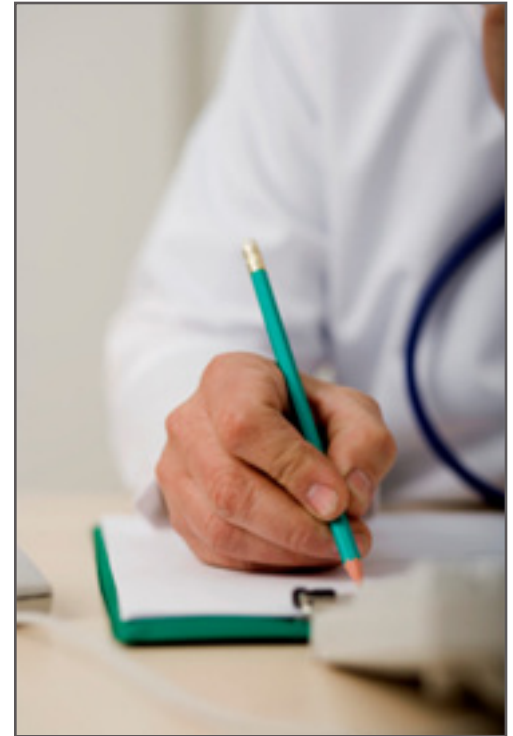
That some graduate students pay someone else to write their papers exemplifies this. In the November 2010 edition of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Ed Dante reports on the issue of graduate students paying to have their papers written for them. Dante has written for pay about all manner of subjects, from sustainability to philosophy and from anthropology to ethics. (Yes, ethics!) Dante's successful business points to the insufficiency of communication skills that affect nearly every field of study.

If the idea isn't conveyed, it doesn't exist

While readable, usable documents are essential in any field, they're absolutely critical in science. Stephen C. Stearns, Ph.D., founding editor of the *Journal of Evolutionary Biology*, advises graduate students on Yale University's Department of Ecology & Evolutionary Biology site:

Science is shared knowledge. Until the results are effectively communicated, they in effect do not exist.

And while certainly this is true for science, it's also true for documents written in other professions.



To put it simply: if the idea isn't conveyed so that it's understood by the target audience, the idea doesn't exist. And lest we believe that readers are to blame when they don't understand a written document, Stearns puts that idea to rest: "If [as the reader] you do not understand something, don't feel bad — it's not your fault, it's the author's. He didn't write clearly enough."

Improved quality — of writing and thought

As George Gopen and Judith Swan note in *American Scientist*, "Science is often hard to read ... [yet] complexity of thought need not lead to impenetrability of expression. Improving the quality of writing actually improves the quality of thought."

Great writing might not come naturally, but it *can* be learned.

Professionals shouldn't be expected to learn writing strategies through trial and error or by picking up skills from colleagues. Too much is at stake: a professional's ability to relay knowledge clearly and concisely directly affects how his or her work is perceived by colleagues, clients, and the public and can impact the reputation of your organization.

In short, good technical, business, and scientific writing requires critical thinking and problem-solving skills, attributes that most professionals have. For most, they simply need to learn how to transfer these skills when they write. A good writing course, whether online or onsite, that focuses not on grammar but on teaching strategies that incorporate critical thinking and problem-solving skills, can go a long way toward helping any professional, regardless of the field, write succinct, clear, and usable documents.

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