

Eleanor Agnew

# BASIC WRITERS IN THE WORKPLACE: WRITING ADEQUATELY FOR CAREERS AFTER COLLEGE

*ABSTRACT: As part of a larger research project on basic writers in the workforce after college, 21 former basic writers who held postgraduate jobs were interviewed in person. This article focuses on one of the research questions of the study: how do formerly weak writers manage to write adequately for their jobs? Through information given in the interviews, it was concluded that the rhetorical, psychological, and social environment of the workplace fostered better writing in basic writers than the academic environment had. This article recommends Writing Across the Curriculum as one means of duplicating the workplace-writing content in college writing classes.*

How do basic writers write adequately for their jobs after college? The vast amount of research on writing in the workplace has made it quite clear that writing is “one of the most important job-related skills for most college graduates, regardless of major” (Anderson 30).<sup>1</sup> If this is true, then it is surprising that no one has followed basic writers into the workplace after graduation to see how well they are able to manage their work-related writing tasks. Of all the students in the graduating populations of colleges and universities, they are the ones whose writing skills we should worry about the most.<sup>2</sup>

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If predictions about basic writers' success with on-the-job writing were based on the early scholarship, the expectations would not be high. Much of the 1970s literature implied that basic writers' substandard texts resulted from internalized flaws, such as egocentrism, difficulties with transcription, numerous pauses, and preoccupation with error<sup>3</sup> which they would carry with them into any writing situation. As Shaughnessy noted, the very names given to remedial writers were often "medical metaphor[s] [which suggest] a disease, and indeed students assigned to remedial classes do get sent to writing 'labs' or 'clinics' where their problems are 'diagnosed' . . ." (137).

However, in the following decade, when *context* became recognized as a vital component of the writing process (Beach and Bridwell, Kantor, Faigley, Herrington, Odell), scholars began to suggest that at least part of the problem for basic writers was the rhetorical, social, and psychological barriers inherent in the academic context itself (Bartholomae, Bennett and Rhodes, Bizzell, Brand and Powell, Collins and Williamson, Haswell, Kogen, Rose, Wolcott and Buhr).

Furthermore, I had taught at a college with a high number of nontraditional students, many of whom had been working at respectable, non-burger-flipping jobs for years. Because these adults did not write well in my class, I wondered how they could have held jobs all these years. The research on workplace writing, the introductions to composition textbooks and the wisdom of veteran teachers all maintained that employees had to have good writing skills to land jobs, keep jobs, and advance on jobs. Yet when tactfully questioned about this, most of these nontraditional students claimed that they did write at work and that it had not been a problem for them. Of course, it might be argued that the role of writing is less crucial in jobs that can be acquired without a college degree. But more than a few times, I had encountered ex-basic writing students who *had* graduated, who appeared at least as polished, professional—and yes, successful!—as any other employed adult with a college degree.

Suspecting that the writing context of the workplace is more favorable for basic writers, I sought (as part of a larger study) a group of employed college graduates who had been in the workforce for one to five years, whose grade histories suggested that writing had been difficult for them during college. The twenty-one former basic writers who were interviewed were chosen from a population of 119 former basic writers (hereafter referred to as FBWs) who responded to a survey (see Appendix One) which asked a wide range of

questions about writing practices, as well as feelings, attitudes, anxieties, and beliefs about writing at work.<sup>4</sup>

Interviews, which took about one hour, were held in participants' homes, places of work, or in public locations. Interviewees included three teachers, three social workers, three sales representatives, two insurance agents, a computer programmer and consultant, a real estate appraiser, a land surveyor, an asbestos worker, a health physics technician, a court recorder, a chemist, a commercial photographer, a yard maintenance worker, and an estimator for a construction company. Although they were asked uniform questions (see Appendix 2), they were not told that their earlier grade histories were known.<sup>5</sup>

Most of the FBWs in this study believed they were writing adequately for their jobs<sup>6</sup> and felt satisfied with their writing ability at work.<sup>7</sup> However, they did not claim to be good writers. Most considered themselves average or weak writers who were willing to work at making their written products satisfactory. As one sales representative described it, "I feel like I'm pretty good at it, but it's agonizing."

No doubt, the passage of time had helped. Five to ten years had elapsed since these FBWs had taken their freshman writing courses, which had made a considerable difference in their attitude and motivation. A real estate appraiser recalled, "[When I was in college] I was trying to get by . . . to have a good time and do what it [took] to get by."

However, in addition to maturity, certain other factors, unique to the workplace, had converged to create a more favorable context for writing.

### **Short, Repetitive, Pared-Down Writing Tasks**

The types of writing tasks most frequently done at work were short memos, long memos, one-page letters, informal notes to someone else, and filling out preprinted forms.<sup>8</sup> Except for the preprinted forms, these types of writing tasks were short, usually no more than a page long. One of the FBWs, a sales representative for a chemical company explained, "There are not a whole lot of places I can go wrong."

Workwriting was routine and repetitive. FBWs were not confronted with new topics, new modes, and new audiences every few days, as in English class. For example, several social workers regularly wrote up case histories of new clients. The life stories of clients contained variations, but the format, length, style, purpose, and audience were the same every time. An insurance agent wrote

letters to prospective clients to solicit business, a teacher sent short memos home to parents to report children's progress and problems, a real estate appraiser described property values. While the subject matter varied slightly, the purpose, audience or audience profile, and writer's persona usually stayed the same.

### **Time Frames**

The FBWs said they usually had more than sufficient time to write at work although many reported that they procrastinated until the last minute anyway. Often no formal deadline existed; it was simply understood that writing tasks, inseparable from broader job goals, should be completed as soon as possible. Employees could set up reasonable but flexible deadlines, such as "by the end of the day" or "the end of the week." Mandated deadlines, usually days or weeks in the future, were not difficult to meet either, according to the FBWs. Moreover, the relatively short length of the majority of writing tasks and the routine and repetitive nature of these tasks made either mandated or self-imposed deadlines predictable and less intimidating.

Deadlines were flexible. A sales representative for a food company said, "Deadlines are important, but not that important. I have to prioritize all the time. And if a report is late, then whoever it's late for usually understands. If it's late, it's late."

As a result, FBWs had a sense of autonomy over their writing. They had the freedom to write when and where it best suited their schedules or moods, using composing strategies that worked best for them. A sales representative for a meat company said, "I get up early and write Monday's proposals on Monday morning. I won't even do it the night before. It's crazy, isn't it? That's just how I work."

### **Being Valued for Other Skills**

In most occupations other than journalism, writing ability is second in importance to knowledge of the field. Though employers want employees with top writing skills, even more, they want employees with top working skills. The FBWs in this study had been hired for their knowledge of the field, not their proficiency in English.<sup>9</sup> Right from the start of their careers, these FBWs were aware that they had been hired and valued for talents, skills, or purposes other than writing, giving them a psychological advantage when they did have to write.

## **Freedom from Grades**

Writing done at work was not free from judgment, but it was free from final, irrevocable grades, which had often scared FBWs in the past. A first-grade teacher stated, “[At work] you work on [a writing task] until it’s right, and then you send it. I like that better. There’s not that finality of the grade . . . at work, it’s a lot more relaxed atmosphere where writing is concerned. . . .” A social worker said, “You don’t ‘fail’ at work, you just get talked to, so [writing for] school is a lot tougher [than writing] at work [where] you get to do it over and over, but in school you usually have just one or two chances.”

## **Motivation**

The workplace provides very powerful incentives to write well. Job security, reputation, and ultimately, the paycheck undoubtedly have more clout than grades. A social worker who had been out of college for five years said, “In school, you’re [writing] for a grade, and it just doesn’t seem to add up like it does when you do it for money.” A free-lance commercial photographer said he found it motivating that “big businesses who make a lot of money . . . [didn’t] mind spending a lot of money” on him when they hired him to do brochures and pamphlets for their advertising. Companies also paid him well for creating preprinted forms. He said, “I don’t sit and do this on Sunday afternoon for fun, but on Monday when they want to pay, I’m working!”

In addition, FBWs wanted to look professional to the public. A real estate appraiser explained, “Being that we make our living writing documents for people to read, I would think that [a weakly written report] would be something we’d want to shy away from.” A worker in an asbestos plant said, “We deal with hundreds of thousands worth of dollars in contracts and we need to be professional.” A computer programmer and consultant pointed out that his customers “would wonder if I knew what I was doing if I couldn’t spell and they had just spent \$30,000 on a software package.” A sales representative said, “[My writing] may be all someone sees of me. There’s a lot of selling I do with people who are out of town. . . .”

FBWs also considered the impressions they made upon their bosses, particularly principals in the school system, who took an interest in how well their employees wrote. The teachers who were interviewed said that employees who made errors in their writing were often “talked to” by the principal.

Moreover, FBWs worried about co-workers. A first-grade teacher, for example, usually wrote several drafts of the long memos she left for substitute teachers to be sure the text was clear and error-free. She stated, "It would be awful if a substitute came in who was good in English and thought, 'Boy, this teacher doesn't know what she's doing and she's a teacher!' I worry about things like that because word travels quickly."

During interviews, FBWs showed a real concern about writing well. Their awareness of its importance, their anecdotes about multiple revisions, editing, and consultations with co-workers, left little doubt that most of them took writing seriously enough to work hard at it.

### **Community of Writers**

Not only had FBWs gained the psychological advantage of being valued members of a discourse community, they could rely on co-workers for help with their writing. Formal collaboration did not take place often, but informal discussion or brainstorming with colleagues about job-related ideas was simply a natural part of the workday. FBWs said the most frequent method they used to ensure producing adequate writing was to ask co-workers, secretaries, or even relatives outside of work to proofread and edit the more important written texts. This was the final finishing touch they employed after they had produced the ideas, shaped the organization, and then proofread to the best of their ability. An FBW who was a teacher said:

If we notice something [in a co-worker's writing], we'll point it out. Once, our guidance counselor put out a letter on testing that had something grammatically wrong with it and everybody was dying because they knew if it went out to the parents, the principal would be really upset.

Virtually every FBW interviewed relied on co-worker collaboration to catch sentence-level errors. Most places of work seemed to have at least one person who was the unofficial English expert. Secretaries, too, were also mentioned as important screeners of errors.

### **Knowledge of the Subject Matter**

FBWs stated frequently during the interviews that having knowledge of the subject matter at the forefront was a crucial advantage.<sup>10</sup> "Instead of writing about *A Tale of Two Cities*, I'm

writing about something I'm knowledgeable of," said a sales representative. "It just seems easier to write. When I know about something, I'm more comfortable writing about it." In college writing classes, writers are expected to respond to unfamiliar topics by coaxing enough subject matter for a "well-developed essay" out of their personal knowledge hoards through invention techniques. This is often difficult, frustrating, and time-consuming for basic writers, especially when confronted with topics they have not thought about before. At work, on the other hand, the subject matter is readily available; the job *is* the subject matter. For example, an asbestos worker who wrote a report about the asbestos level in a building, created the subject matter for the report by doing the inspection.

The FBWs in this study not only had knowledge of the subject matter, but an interest in it since it was related to their chosen fields.<sup>11</sup>

### **Familiarity with the Audience**

Not only could FBWs, when asked, immediately identify the audience for every writing task, they also knew *why* each audience needed the communication or *how* that audience would use the information. Just as the job itself created the subject matter, the job also created the audience (the need for communication with the audience would not exist without the job) and defined the audience's needs and concerns. The same asbestos inspector referred to above automatically knew, without having to analyze the situation deeply, that regardless of background, income, gender, or politics, the audience for his report, which created itself when it sought the asbestos inspection service, had a concern about the asbestos level in the building, its effects upon health, and an interest in the cost of correcting the situation.

### **Persona**

The writer's persona is also shaped by the job description. A sales representative in this study wrote a letter to a client acknowledging an error he had made in a recent business transaction, offering to correct the problem. Since the main purpose of his job was to sell his product, soothing unhappy clients was clearly an important subgoal of his job. As a result, in the letter, his persona is that of a friendly salesman, sincerely apologetic for his error, eager to make amends. Certainly this persona sprang naturally

from the writer's awareness of what his job required and his eagerness to do the job well.

## **Purpose**

All the FBWs had a clear vision of what they expected to accomplish through each work-related writing task. They recognized that writing was a powerful tool that could reap *real* rewards or consequences. An eighth-grade teacher recalled writing a long memo to the principal reporting the misbehavior of a student. When the student's mother appeared in person to accuse her of lying, she was quite upset. Another FBW, a sales representative, said he was involved in a written dialogue with a dissatisfied customer who was on the verge of suing his company. He said:

I'm nervous because I could say something [in my correspondence] that might hurt us if we got to court about it if I didn't explain something clearly enough. Or, if I didn't state something I should have, and they would be one step above us.

At work, perhaps for the first time, the FBWs could see the results a written product could bring, repercussions sometimes far more powerful than a grade written at the top of an essay. This fueled a sense of purpose. Said a sales representative, "There are reasons behind everything I do at work."

Thus, when writing for a job, the former basic writer has a tremendous advantage: the key components of the communication triangle, knowledge of the subject matter, keen audience awareness, a strong sense of purpose, and a job-related writing persona, are inseparable offshoots of the job itself.

## **Implications**

One of the most obvious implications of this study is that educators should recognize the aspects of the work environment which seem to foster better writing in basic writers and try to duplicate them in the remedial writing classroom. Interestingly, the conditions and writing practices of the workplace which are both possible and appropriate for the classroom are inherent in many of the innovative pedagogies spawned by the process movement over the past two decades. It is generally agreed that most college students, particularly basic writers, benefit from such pedagogical practices as collaborative writing, peer editing, sequenced assign-



ments, multiple drafting, varied writing formats, fewer grades and more conferencing, and informal, student-centered classes.

However, it is unfortunate that writing across the curriculum (WAC), defined by Fulwiler and Young as “the movement to treat writing more seriously in all disciplines” (1), has not yet been as widely adapted as these other innovations. Although the movement is gaining in strength, two recent surveys show that only 35% to 38% of responding colleges and universities have WAC programs (McLeod 338; Fulwiler and Young 1). WAC programs, according to Mahala, can include writing which ranges from the more formal “methodological prescriptions” of each discipline (779) to the more expressive exploratory or analytic journal writing. Writing across the curriculum, especially during the freshman year, would give basic writers that same important rhetorical advantage available to workplace writers: knowledge of the subject matter. Whether writing lengthy Environmental Zoology lab reports, as described by Prof. Douglas Eagles of Georgetown University (Fulwiler and Young 20) or writing expressive journal entries about botany, as described by Prof. David Barrington of the University of Vermont (Fulwiler and Young 53), inexperienced writers not only would gain from the additional writing practice, but would be less likely, with a body of knowledge already at hand, to claim that they “can’t think of anything to say,” a problem which often arises in traditional freshman or remedial English classes because of the course’s subjectless nature (MacDonald; Russell). Less consumed by the struggle to “invent” bare bones material for papers, basic writers who are required to write in other disciplines could shift more attention to problem-solving, analysis, organization, style, and editing.

In addition, the strong sense of purpose and motivation felt by the FBWs in this study were cultivated by the reality of the writing situation. Therefore, basic writing teachers should bring more reality-based subject matter into the remedial classroom through activities such as publishing a class newsletter, as described by Fluitt-Dupuy, reporting on outside events, interviewing people from the community, or collecting information from the library. Writing teachers could also assign students to write for real audiences outside the classroom. For example, one teacher I know requires her students to choose a personal problem, research the name and address of the person who is able to correct the matter, and write a complaint letter which is actually mailed out. This teacher says she has never seen students work so hard to make sure their final copies are clear and error-free, for the anticipation of having a “real” audience other than the teacher read the letter and even react to it was very inspiring.

One of the FBWs in this study, an estimator for a construction

company, summed up his feelings about the difference between writing in college and writing at work: "I hate the fact that I now have the tools I need to write, and I didn't have them [in college]. I almost wish I could go back now and show that professor that I do know how to write."

## Appendix 1 Survey



ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE  
**GEORGIA SOUTHERN**

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH AND PHILOSOPHY

1. What is your current job?  
\_\_\_\_\_

Are you working full-time \_\_\_\_\_ or part-time? \_\_\_\_\_

2. Briefly describe your job  
\_\_\_\_\_

**IF YOU ARE PRESENTLY NOT WORKING, CHECK HERE \_\_\_\_\_ AND ANSWER QUESTIONS 3, 4, 6, AND 7 ONLY.**

3. What was your college major?  
\_\_\_\_\_

4. How would you best describe your feelings toward writing when you were in college? (Check one).

- 1) Very positive \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Somewhat positive \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Neutral \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Somewhat negative \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) Very negative \_\_\_\_\_

5. How would you best describe your feelings towards the writing you do now at work? (Check one).

- 1) Very positive \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Somewhat positive \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Neutral \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Somewhat negative \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) Very negative \_\_\_\_\_

6. How would you best describe your feelings towards your writing ability now? (Check one).

- 1) Very satisfied \_\_\_\_\_
- 2) Somewhat satisfied \_\_\_\_\_
- 3) Neutral \_\_\_\_\_
- 4) Somewhat dissatisfied \_\_\_\_\_
- 5) Very dissatisfied \_\_\_\_\_

7. How much did your feelings about writing affect your choice of a college major? (Check one).

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1) I **strongly sought** a major which I thought required a lot of writing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2) I **somewhat sought** a major which I thought required a lot of writing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3) My feelings toward writing had **no effect** one way or the other.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4) I **somewhat avoided** a major which I thought required a lot of writing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5) I **strongly avoided** a major which I thought required a lot of writing.

8. When you looked for your first job after college graduation, how much did your feelings toward writing influence the type of job you sought? (Check one).

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1) I **strongly sought** a job which I thought required a lot of writing.

\_\_\_\_\_ 2) I **somewhat sought** a job which I thought required a lot of writing.

\_\_\_\_\_ 3) My feelings toward writing had **no effect** on the type of job I sought.

\_\_\_\_\_ 4) I **somewhat avoided** a job which I thought required a lot of writing.

\_\_\_\_\_ 5) I **strongly avoided** a job which I thought required a lot of writing.

9. When you were interviewed for your current job, did the interviewer ask you any questions about the quality of your writing skills? (Check one).

- \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No \_\_\_\_\_ I don't remember
- \_\_\_\_\_ I was not interviewed for my current job

10. If you answered "NO" to Question 9 above, which of the reasons listed below best explain why you were not asked about your writing skills? (Check all that apply.)

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1) The job I was applying for required very little or no writing.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2) The job I was applying for required writing, but the quality of the writing was not important.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3) My other skills, such as knowledge of the field, were more important to the interviewer.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4) The interviewer assumed that because I was a college graduate, I had reasonably good writing skills.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5) Other (fill in the blank) \_\_\_\_\_

11. In your day to day job performance, how important is it to your job security for you to write well? (Check one).

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1) My writing ability has **no influence** on my job security.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2) My writing ability has **minimal influence** on my job security.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3) My writing ability has a **moderate influence** on my job security.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4) My writing ability has an **important influence** on my job security.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5) My job security is **entirely dependent** on my ability to write.

12. In your current job, how much influence do you think your writing skills will have upon your future promotions and advancements? (Check one).

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1) My writing skills will have **no influence** upon future promotions and advancements.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2) My writing skills will have **minimal influence** upon future promotions or advancements.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3) My writing skills will have a **moderate effect** upon future promotions or advancements.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4) My writing skills will have an **important effect** upon future promotions or advancements.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5) My future promotions or advancements will be **entirely dependent** upon my writing skills.

## Appendix 1—Continued

13. In your current job, how often are you required to write several sentences or more? (Check one).

- 1) Never
- 2) Once a month
- 3) Once a week
- 4) Two or three times per week
- 5) At least once per day

14. Overall, how much of your time at work would you say is spent writing?

- 1) 0%
- 2) 1-10%
- 3) 11-20%
- 4) 21-40%
- 5) 41-60%
- 6) 61-80%
- 7) 81-100%

15. Complete the following sentences by checking all that apply to you:

"In my work-related writing, my strengths as a writer include..."

- 1) my ability to express myself clearly and effectively.\*
- 2) my ideas.\*
- 3) my knowledge of the subject.\*
- 4) my ability to organize my material well.\*
- 5) my proficiency in grammar, spelling and mechanics.\*
- 6) my vocabulary.\*
- 7) my speed in writing.\*
- 8) my style of writing.\*
- 9) other (fill in the blank):

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

16. Complete the following sentence by filling in the blank:

"In my work-related writing, my weaknesses as a writer include

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

17. Do you ever get feedback on the quality of your writing ability?

Although it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between the writing **QUALITY** itself and the task you are achieving through writing, this question refers to the feedback you receive which directly applies to writing **ABILITY**, not the task which the writing accomplishes. Check any of the following people who have ever made positive or negative comments about your writing ability, either verbally or in writing.

- 1. Boss
- 2. Co-workers
- 3. General public
- 4. People from other companies or businesses
- 5. Other (fill in the blank):

\_\_\_\_\_

18. How often do you write the following forms of communication? Circle the number which best corresponds to the frequency for each type of communication:

	1 NEVER	2 ONCE A MONTH	3 ONCE A WEEK	4 TWO OR THREE TIMES PER WEEK	5 EVERY DAY
Short Memos (less than 1/2 a page)	1	2	3	4	5
Long Memos (more than 1/2 a page)	1	2	3	4	5
1-page letters	1	2	3	4	5
2-page letters	1	2	3	4	5
3-page letters	1	2	3	4	5
Informal notes to someone else	1	2	3	4	5
Oral dictation for someone to type	1	2	3	4	5
Filling out of pre-printed forms	1	2	3	4	5
Creating the format of pre-printed forms	1	2	3	4	5
Proposals (for funding or projects)	1	2	3	4	5
Formal reports (with title page)	1	2	3	4	5
Minutes of meetings or conversations	1	2	3	4	5
Written speeches	1	2	3	4	5
Articles for professional journals	1	2	3	4	5
Articles for company newsletters	1	2	3	4	5
Articles for public relations	1	2	3	4	5
Articles for the newspaper	1	2	3	4	5
Brochures/pamphlets	1	2	3	4	5
Contracts	1	2	3	4	5
Format letters (someone gives you general instructions for what is to be said and you write the specific text)	1	2	3	4	5

Other \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix 1—Continued

19. When you are writing at work, what effect do the factors listed below have upon your writing? (Circle the appropriate number. If any of these factors do not exist in your work-related writing processes, circle NA (not applicable))

	1	2	3	4	5	6
	VERY POSITIVE EFFECT	SOME POSITIVE EFFECT	NO EFFECT	SOME NEGATIVE EFFECT	VERY NEGATIVE EFFECT	NA
A. Knowledge of your field	1	2	3	4	5	6
B. Amount of time for writing	1	2	3	4	5	6
C. Location of writing	1	2	3	4	5	6
D. Knowing that your writing will be read by someone	1	2	3	4	5	6
E. Following pre-established formats (for ex., form letters)	1	2	3	4	5	6
F. The amount of motivation you usually have	1	2	3	4	5	6
G. Office equipment available to help you write	1	2	3	4	5	6
H. Your ability to express yourself clearly	1	2	3	4	5	6
I. Your vocabulary	1	2	3	4	5	6
J. Your grammar, spelling and mechanics	1	2	3	4	5	6
K. Speed at which you write	1	2	3	4	5	6
L. Knowing who you are writing for	1	2	3	4	5	6
M. Assistance with your writing from co-workers	1	2	3	4	5	6
N. Length of writing required	1	2	3	4	5	6
O. Opportunities to revise writing	1	2	3	4	5	6
P. Your enthusiasm for the subject you are writing about	1	2	3	4	5	6

20. Writing is a highly individualized act, and most people have unique ways of putting together a final written product. Circle how often you do any of the following activities when you do work-related writing:

	1 NEVER (0-25% of the time)	2 SELDOM (25-50% of the time)	3 SOME- TIMES (51-75% of the time)	4 OFTEN (76-100% of the time)	5 ALWAYS
A. Talk to someone else about the subject matter	1	2	3	4	5
B. Talk to someone else about the purpose of the writing	1	2	3	4	5
C. Think about or try to find out about the person or people who will read what you write	1	2	3	4	5
D. Make an informal list of notes about what you want to say	1	2	3	4	5
E. Make a formal outline	1	2	3	4	5
F. Write at least one rough draft	1	2	3	4	5
G. Write at least two rough drafts	1	2	3	4	5
H. Write at least three rough drafts	1	2	3	4	5
I. Look up words in the dictionary	1	2	3	4	5
J. Look up rules in a grammar book	1	2	3	4	5
K. Look up words in a thesaurus	1	2	3	4	5
L. Make minor changes in punctuation or wording after the final draft is written	1	2	3	4	5
M. Have someone else read your final draft to check for errors	1	2	3	4	5
N. Re-read the final draft yourself to check for errors	1	2	3	4	5

Other (fill in the blank):

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## Appendix 1—Continued

	1	2	3	4	5
	STRONGLY AGREE	SOME WHAT AGREE	NEUTRAL	SOME WHAT DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
21. Circle each number below that best matches your feeling about each statement.					
1. I avoid or postpone my work-related writing	1	2	3	4	5
2. I have no fear of my work-related writing being evaluated	1	2	3	4	5
3. I look forward to writing down my job-related ideas	1	2	3	4	5
4. I am afraid to write when I know it will be evaluated	1	2	3	4	5
5. Writing for my job is a very frightening experience	1	2	3	4	5
6. Finishing a written project for my job makes me feel good	1	2	3	4	5
7. My mind seems to go blank when I start writing at work	1	2	3	4	5
8. Expressing ideas through writing seems to be a waste of time	1	2	3	4	5
9. I would enjoy submitting my writing to magazines	1	2	3	4	5
10. I like to write my job-related ideas down	1	2	3	4	5
11. I feel confident in my ability to clearly express my ideas in writing	1	2	3	4	5
12. I like to have my boss or co-workers read my writing	1	2	3	4	5
13. I'm nervous about writing for my job	1	2	3	4	5
14. My boss or co-workers seem to enjoy what I write	1	2	3	4	5
15. I enjoy writing at work	1	2	3	4	5
16. I never seem to be able to clearly write down my ideas	1	2	3	4	5
17. Writing at work is a lot of fun	1	2	3	4	5
18. I expected to write poorly at work BEFORE starting this job	1	2	3	4	5
19. I like seeing my thoughts on paper	1	2	3	4	5
20. I enjoy discussing my writing with others	1	2	3	4	5
21. I have trouble organizing my ideas when writing	1	2	3	4	5
22. I feel that my writing is going to be negatively evaluated	1	2	3	4	5
23. It's easy for me to write well at work	1	2	3	4	5
24. I don't think I write as well as my co-workers	1	2	3	4	5
25. I don't like my written work to be evaluated	1	2	3	4	5
26. I'm not good at writing	1	2	3	4	5

### THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR RESPONDING TO THIS SURVEY!

As a college English teacher and researcher, I want to learn more about the types of writing our college graduates do in their jobs, their attitudes towards writing, and their advice on how teachers can make English more enjoyable and applicable to future occupations.

Would you be willing to let me interview you at the time and place of your convenience so that I can learn more about this?

The interview will take about one hour.

YES                      NO

If yes, please write down your current phone number

\_\_\_\_\_.

## Appendix 2

### Interview Questions

1. What do you do?
2. How long have you worked there?
3. Do you have any memories of your required English courses in college, such as English 101, etc. (If yes, what do you remember most about them; what stands out? What kind of feelings come to your mind?)
4. Were you a good writer in college? (Expand, explain, describe.)
5. Grades aside, what skills did you learn in your required English courses that you remember and sometimes use today in work writing? What is the least valuable thing you did in college composition classes that you would never have any use for today?
6. You said on the survey that your writing skills had \_\_\_\_\_ effect on your choice of a job. What did you want most from your job? OR Why did you seek/avoid a job that involved writing?
7. How did you get your current job?

(Refer to separate chart listing types of writing interviewee had reported doing on the survey): Now I'm going to ask you some specific questions about the types of writing you do. For each TYPE of writing on this list which you've said you do, I'm going to ask you to first explain the PURPOSE for the writing (what do you expect to achieve by writing). STOP, GO OVER THE LIST.

Second, tell me the ASSIGNER of the writing: is it a) assigned by a boss, as in "\_\_\_\_\_, we need this report on the X project by Friday"; b) a routine type of writing that you do over and over again without being specifically asked, or c) something non-routine that you do of your own initiative, as you feel it's needed.

Third, who will see this writing (Boss, co-worker, general public)?

Fourth, how long does it take you to write it (from the time you have your pen poised above paper) and how much time is available to you if you needed it?

Fifth, I'm going to define "the writing process" as everything you do that goes into a final written product, including thinking about the writing, conferring with other people, looking up a word in a dictionary, writing a rough draft, etc. One's writing processes might consist of everything mentioned above and more or it might consist of just picking up a pen and writing something then and there. People use different strategies for different writing tasks. With this in mind, what type of writing processes do you use for all the following:

Sixth, tell me on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being Enjoy very much to 5 being Detest very much, the degree of enjoyment you get out of any types of writing (IF enjoy or detest, why, explain).

Last, do any of the types of writing you do make you nervous?

## Appendix 2—Continued

8. Do you have a favorite type of writing that you do outside of work? Why do you enjoy it?

9. Do you feel any different about the writing you do now for your job than you felt about the writing you did in your required English courses in college? (Describe, explain, expand ... how is it different?)

10. You said in the earlier survey that you feel \_\_\_\_\_ about your writing at work. What makes you feel this way? (Why do you feel \_\_\_\_\_ about it than you did about college writing?)

11. How do you feel about your writing ability now?

12. (When relevant): You said on the survey that you are dissatisfied with your writing ability now. Why? Explain. (Does this have any effect on work life?)

13. Would it make a difference in your job if you were, say, the best writer ever to graduate from a 4-yr. college in the South East? How?

14. Why do you think that your writing ability has \_\_\_\_\_ influence on your current job security? (Explain, expand, discuss.)

15. Why do you think that your writing ability will have \_\_\_\_\_ influence on your future promotions and advancements?

16. What are your strengths as a writer, at work?

17. Does this strength(s) come naturally to you or did you learn it somewhere along the line? When? Where?

18. What qualities does your employer (or you, if self-employed) value most in you?

19. Do you have any weaknesses as a writer?

20. How do you deal with these weaknesses in your work-related writing? (Depending on which answers were checked on survey.)

21. Describe what your Boss has said about your writing.

22. Describe what your co-workers have said about your writing.

23. Describe what the general public has said about your writing.

24. Describe what people from other companies have said about your writing.

25. Describe what "others" have said about your writing.

26. Explain why "Knowledge of your field" has a \_\_\_\_\_ effect on your writing.

27. Do you generally feel motivated to write well at work? Why? (If subject does not feel particularly motivated now.)

28. What would make you feel more motivated to write at work?

29. Do you do any kind of collaborative writing or collaborative pre-writing, such as group meetings and brainstorming sessions, talking with other employees, co-outlining, co-writing, etc. How often? For what types of writing?

30. What effect does collaboration have upon 1) the quality of the final written product, 2) Your attitude towards writing, 3) Your anxiety about writing.

31. Are your speaking skills an important part of your job?

## Appendix 2—Continued

32. Are your speaking skills better than, equal to or worse than, your writing skills?
33. Are your reading skills important to your job performance? Describe how they are used.
34. Are your reading skills (speed, comprehension) better than, equal to or worse than your writing skills?
35. Do you ever look up rules in a grammar book? Why not?
36. Do you miss anything about college writing?
37. Are you ever nervous about how well you write at work? (If yes, ask WHY?)
38. What comments could you make about the way writing is taught in college, high school or elementary schools. What changes, if any, would you suggest? Why?
39. Overall, does your writing ability today have any effect on your general job performance?
40. Nowadays, for today's college graduates, how important would you say it is to be able to write well? (Explain, describe, expand.)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul Anderson's chapter in Odell and Goswami's *Writing in the Nonacademic Setting* summarizes the findings of 50 studies on workplace writing, including a study by Anderson.

<sup>2</sup> Perhaps no one has wanted to do such a study because it would mean acknowledging the presence of basic writers in many college populations right up until graduation. Officially, basic writers are either lost to attrition or are successfully remediated during the first few years of college. Therefore, theoretically, there is no such thing as a basic writer/college graduate. However, I do not mind being the first to admit publicly that I have seen basic writing among upperclass college students, and I imagine other experienced teachers have also. These unofficial basic writers are the students who passed remedial English by a hair's breadth, earning Cs by struggling all semester to produce sparse, strained prose which was right on the cusp, but not quite bad enough to fail. Then their writing ability regressed after they completed the required English courses because they were cut off from the continuous workout with the language. Never again during college would they write as much or as frequently. I maintain that basic writers do graduate from college; they are just not *called* basic writers anymore.

<sup>3</sup> Greenberg's chapter in Enos' *A Sourcebook for Basic Writing Teachers* (1987) provides an overview of the scholarship on basic writers.

<sup>4</sup> The original survey population of 182 FBWs was selected from among the 1,919 students who had graduated from Francis Marion College, a small, four-year liberal arts college in Florence, SC, between 1985 and 1989. A population of 62 former strong writers (FSWs) was also used as a basis for comparison. The response rate to the survey was 68%; 65% for FBWs; and 75% for FSWs.



A numerical ranking system was used to select participants for the study. All 1,919 graduates were assigned penalty points in reverse proportion to grades in and repetitions of required English courses. Grades were obtained with permission from the college's Guidance and Placement Office. Using this system, 182 people out of 1,919 graduates qualified as FBWs and 68 people qualified as FSWs. The small sizes of the two populations reflect the stringent standards used for selection to ensure that those targeted for the study were the very weakest or the very strongest writers of the college population.

Although grades are not a foolproof tool for predicting skills, the ranking system was the best objective measure available. Selecting a population of FBWs based on personal evaluation of writing would have brought with it the even larger limitation of subjectively defining basic writing.

<sup>5</sup> The reasons for this should be obvious. First and foremost, I wanted honest answers to the survey and interviews. If respondents knew they had been selected based on weak or strong grades, the responses may have been biased. Bogdan and Taylor state that keeping certain aspects of a project hidden from participants is common practice in research.

<sup>6</sup> Formally evaluating the participants' writing was beyond the scope of this project, so I will not claim that their writing was "good." However, through interviews, I learned that most of the FBWs were genuinely concerned with the quality of their writing and worked hard at it. This—along with the fact that their employment had not been terminated—led to the conclusion that these FBWs were at least writing adequately for their jobs.

<sup>7</sup> Question number 6 on the survey asked respondents to rate how satisfied they were with their writing ability at work. The majority of FBWs (68%) reported feeling either "Very satisfied" or "Somewhat satisfied" with it. A Spearman statistical analysis of survey data showed that satisfaction did *not* increase as the amount of writing decreased. In other words, satisfaction was not a reaction to writing which was *not* being done.

<sup>8</sup> These five types of writing were done once per month or more by the majority of both FBWs and FSWs. FBWs reported writing these five forms at least as often and sometimes more often than FSWs.

<sup>9</sup> The majority of both FBWs and FSWs, 69% and 75% respectively, reported on the questionnaire that they had not been asked about their writing skills during job interviews.

<sup>10</sup> Eighty-five percent of FBW survey respondents and 83% of FSWs reported that having knowledge of the subject matter had a "Very positive" or "Somewhat positive" effect on their writing.

<sup>11</sup> According to survey data, "Enthusiasm for the subject" had a "Very positive" or "Somewhat positive" effect on 70% of the FBWs and 81% of FSWs.

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