Is writing important for graduate success?
A preliminary investigation into the communication skills required of Hospitality and Tourism graduates

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Abstract: Interviews were conducted with twenty-seven industry recruiters at a Hospitality and Tourism job fair. Each recruiter was asked whether or not writing was an important skill for recently hired Hospitality and Tourism graduates. The 20-minute interviews allowed participants an opportunity to clarify and provide context to their responses. Relatively few of the recruiters (14.8%) unequivocally characterized writing as an important skill for recently hired hospitality and tourism graduates in any positions. Those who did suggested good writing skills are linked to professionalism and career commitment. However, other recruiters pointed out the relatively infrequent need for frontline employees to write and the industry’s use of writing templates. Other major themes that emerged from a phenomenological analysis of the data are as follows: (i) writing is less important than oral and interpersonal skills for frontline positions (ii) few employers screen for writing skills during the recruitment and selection stage; and (iii) the need grows for writing skills as one’s career progresses. The results of this preliminary study will be used for further research into the communication competencies required in the hospitality and tourism industry.

Key words: writing skills, Hospitality and Tourism employer needs, undergraduate business curriculum, communication competencies
INTRODUCTION

Every university graduate should know how to write clearly and correctly. That statement has long been unassailable, as reflected in the top learning objectives of post-secondary institutions, much of the research literature on factors affecting graduate employment success -- and the popular imagination. Writing well has traditionally been seen as the hallmark of an educated person with good career prospects.

But has this traditional view been usurped by Web 2.0 technology? Does our increasing reliance on digital communication render the ability to write with care, precision -- and even grace -- a quaintly obsolete skill, no longer highly prized in the job market? And therefore do we misguide our students when we preach that learning to write well will significantly advance their career prospects?

These questions, or variations of them, have cropped up in the literature, both research and popular, as of late. In the Pulitzer Prize nominated-book The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brain, author Nicholas Carr wonders whether the sustained ubiquity of the Internet has led to “the linear mind … being pushed aside by a new kind of mind that wants and needs to take in and dole out information in short, disjointed often overlapping bursts” (2010,10). Carr is referring to physiological changes our brains undergo as a result of repeated exposure to the Internet. And evidence that his speculation has merit gets delivered to our doorsteps -- or, more likely, our computer screens -- everyday in the form of “newspapers (that) shorten their articles, introduce capsule summaries, and crowd their pages with easy-to-browse info-snippets” (2010, 10) as a way of adapting to a readership “with a new kind of mind”. In other words, the audience for the kind of writing traditionally taught in post-secondary institutions -- coherently organized, detailed, and in-depth --appears to have diminished.

Not surprisingly then, the need for employees to produce that kind of writing may also be diminishing (Reinsch and Gardner, 2011). For example, over 300 senior industry executives in the United States were surveyed on their perception of the role that writing skills play in career success. The researchers didn’t directly link their findings to the increased role of digital communications. It is difficult not to infer a link, however, with their finding that writing “is likely to become somewhat less important … as the older executives retire and are replaced by the rising generations” (2011,12). The study authors therefore conclude, “an individual who hopes that more skillful writing will lead to the executive suite is, according to the current results, probably engaged in wishful thinking” (2011,13).

One of the authors of this paper teaches writing to undergraduate and graduate students in an applied program, Hospitality and Tourism Management. Like many other faculty, the author preaches the relevance of the course material to the students’ future careers. The
impetus for this study was to ensure that this teaching and preaching is not based on “hopes” and “wishful thinking”. Instead, the authors want to better understand the communication skills that students will need in their future workplace, the hospitality and tourism industry. To that end, the authors interviewed industry professionals at a career fair held at a comprehensive Canadian university located in southwestern Ontario. The following questions were asked: Is writing an important skill for recently hired hospitality and tourism graduates? And if so, what aspects of writing skills are important in their early careers and why?

**RESEARCH METHODS**

To achieve purposeful participant selection, we approached industry professionals attending a career fair held at the university and asked if they would participate in the study. The participants represented various industry positions, including director/manager/vice president (51.9%) and human resource professionals (48.1%). All had extensive experience interacting and working with newly hired graduates. Out of the 40 job fair recruiters, 27 participated in this study.

Industry representation among the interviewees was as follows: 48% from food and beverage operations (restaurants and catering); 33% from lodging (hotels and resorts); and 11% from golf clubs. The remaining 7% were from an event management operation; and a theme park. The gender breakdown of interviewees was 37% male and 63% female.

An open-ended, 20-minute individual interview was used in order to encourage detailed and concrete responses from the participants, allowing the interviewer to probe the topic in more depth than a structured survey questionnaire would have allowed. Most participants expressed reluctance at having the interviews taped; moreover, conditions at the job fair location were relatively noisy and thus not optimum for tape recording. Therefore, a note-taking method was utilized to document 27 interviews. A thematic analysis of the 27 interviews was conducted to identify emergent themes through careful reading and re-reading of the data.

Our approach was phenomenological: to present the interviewees’ perspectives on the role of writing in the workplace. Mindful of the fact that the phenomenological approach “cannot be reduced to a ‘cookbook’ set of instructions” (Keen, 1975, 41) we based our data analysis on the general guidelines set forth by Hycner (1985). Briefly, the interview transcripts were aggregated and organized through a mind mapping exercise; key themes relevant to the research question identified, noting the number of times each theme arose and its distribution throughout the interview sample. Our conclusions were arrived at by drawing linkages among the different themes, “relating the findings to previous research or commentary, to personal experience or even to common sense opinions” (Lester, 1999). With a combined teaching experience of over thirty years, we are confident that we have amassed the personal experience -- and, we hope, the common sense -- to draw sound conclusions. At the same time, as educators we acknowledge our bias on this topic.
– an acknowledgement that some phenomenological researchers characterize as an essential element of the research process (Lester, 1999).

**Results and Discussion**

**The ability to write well conveys professionalism – even in frontline positions**

Only four of the twenty-seven participants (14.8%) unequivocally characterized writing as an important skill for recently hired Hospitality and Tourism graduates in any position, including frontline. Three of these participants directly linked the ability to write well with professionalism. Proper spelling and grammar, the avoidance of “shortcuts” (i.e. the type of abbreviations used in texting), and knowledge of how to format a letter all helped an employee (and therefore the operation) convey a professional image – a particularly important consideration when dealing with “high end clientele” who would “cringe at poor writing skills”. For this reason, job candidates in one operation are routinely asked to compose a business e-mail as part of the interview process.

**A sign of “evolution and growth”**

The participant who characterized writing as an important skill for all recently hired graduates, regardless of their position, explained her response by saying, “Everything communicates. Our expectation (of our employees) is evolution and growth”. From that perspective, writing skills are an indicator of the employee’s potential. Employees who have taken the time and effort to learn how to write well signal that they may be a good long term fit with this operation, embracing its credo of “evolution and growth”.

Of the four participants cited above, two represented higher end restaurant operations; and two represented luxury and upscale hotel operations. That is, the small number of participants who acknowledged the importance of writing in all positions, even front line, came from high-end operations.

**A low priority for frontline positions**

The remaining twenty-three participants qualified their support for the importance of writing through the following explanations:

*Limited or no opportunity for writing among front-line staff*: Six participants (22%) did not perceive writing to be a high priority skill for frontline staff. This response does not necessarily suggest that they perceived writing as unimportant; instead, they stressed that they work within a people-oriented industry that places a high premium on face-to-face exchanges. Consequently, oral communication and interpersonal skills were repeatedly cited among this group of participants as higher priorities than writing skills for frontline staff. One participant from a quick service restaurant summarized the opinions of these other five service industry participants when he said, “there’s no opportunity for writing...
for front line staff. Speaking is their main way of communicating. In operations, speaking is always more important”.

And indeed, this finding is congruent with the research on required employee competencies in business generally. Maes et al’s 1997 study determines that “oral communication (is) consistently identified as the most important competency in evaluating entry-level candidates” (78). And the more recent Reinsch and Gardner survey of employer needs concludes that “faculty who are emphasizing oral communication more than written communication have it right” (2011, 11).

**Poor writing skills of newly hired employees:** However, the lower priority placed on writing may have an additional cause: a systemic acceptance (and perhaps expectation) of poor writing skills among newly hired Hospitality and Tourism graduates. Six participants (22%) referred to the poor writing skills of their recently hired Hospitality and Tourism graduates. Two directly attributed the poor writing to the impact of digital technology: “writing skills have changed because of technology. The writing has suffered (e.g., using “hey” as a salutation in e-mails); “short forms have become a problem because of social media”. And two more participants referred to problems in writing that are generally associated with digital communications: “too casual”; “too many abbreviations”; “slang”.

The writing problems cited by these six participants are referred to in a recent study investigating the impact of digital communication on student writing (Purcell, Buchanan and Friedric 2013). This survey of 2,462 Advanced Placement and National Writing Project teachers in the United States reveals a concern that “students’ use of digital tools is having undesirable effects on their writing, including “the ‘creep’ of informal language and style into formal writing” (2). More worrisome, however, is the “general cultural emphasis on truncated forms of expression, which some feel are hindering students’ willingness and ability to write longer texts and to think critically about complicated topics” (2). In other words, the pervasive use of “short forms” and “abbreviations” that characterizes writing with digital tools is not necessarily a benign issue. It may indicate a serious shortcoming in the newly hired graduates’ ability to think critically.

**Reliance on templates or “pre-drawn” documents:** This shortcoming might partly explain why some operations avoid assigning writing duties to newly hired graduates. As one participant explained, “We have templates out of necessity. Once we’re comfortable with their ability (to write), we let them do it on their own”. Three other participants also referred to their organization’s reliance on templates – or “pre-drawn” documents, whereby “the individual manager may sign the letter, but someone else has written it”.

This standardized, somewhat impersonal approach to writing runs counter to a basic tenet in the Hospitality and Tourism industry: personalized service. The routine use of templates in a service-oriented operation suggests they have emerged out of necessity rather than preference, as a strategy to cope with poor writing skills. In other words, perhaps newly hired graduates have few opportunities to write because their employers perceive them as not being able to write well and have subsequently introduced the
template to address this deficiency. From this perspective, industry employers highly value writing that reflects professionalism -- to the extent that they are willing to use templates, a measure that undermines the Hospitality and Tourism industry’s guiding principle of personalized service.

**Setting the bar low**

However, if Hospitality and Tourism employers do, indeed, value good writing, they appear to be setting the bar low for newly hired graduates. For example, few participants stated that they expect job applicants to submit evidence of their writing skills in the form of a cover letter. Not requiring a cover letter may reflect the employers’ preconceived view that it simply isn’t worth the trouble because the applicants can’t write well to begin with. Certainly that view seems to underlie one participant’s comment: “The cover letters are all the same. They’re generic”.

The cover letter’s reduced importance may also be linked to technology’s heightened role in the recruiting process. Several participants appeared to make this connection, with comments such as “We expect resumes. Applications are online. Cover letters aren’t as important as they used to be”; “Very few positions request a cover letter along with a resume. The submission is done online”; and “We don’t expect cover letters. Instead, they do online applications with the resume attached.” In these instances, the speed and convenience associated with online application favour the easy-to-skim, bulleted format of resumes over the complete sentences and fully formed paragraphs of the cover letter. Other employers appear to share this sentiment. David Silverman, a contributor to *The Harvard Business Review Guide to Getting a Job* (2010), sums up the view of many online career forums and blogs when he offers this advice regarding cover letters: “don’t bother” (Silverman, 2009).

The problem with not bothering, however, is that industry employers lose an opportunity to screen their applicants for the presence or absence of good writing skills. Judging the applicants’ ability to write – and thus their ability to avoid the earlier cited problems of poor grammar, spelling, and word choice – solely by their resumes sets the bar too low. Cover letters provide a better indicator.

Cover letters might also indicate other desirable workplace qualities – a point implicitly made by one participant who said, “we expect a resume not a cover letter, but it’s a bonus if you do submit one because it’s an extra step”. In a competitive job market, that “extra step” might help the recent Hospitality and Tourism graduate stand apart in a positive way. After all, by taking the time and effort to submit online a well-written non-required cover letter, applicants indirectly signal that they are not part of that digital cohort described by 68% of writing teachers in a recent PEW survey as “likely to … take shortcuts and not put effort into their writing” when using digital tools (Purcell, Buchanan and Friedrich 2013, 3). Instead they convey a message about their strong work ethic and motivation – highly prized qualities in any job, but particularly in the Hospitality and Tourism industry, which embraces a service culture of going beyond customer expectations.
As career progresses, “the need grows for written skills”

The participants’ generally lukewarm responses regarding the importance of writing for newly hired graduates warmed noticeably when their focus shifted specifically to management positions. Forty percent of the participants referred to the need for industry managers to write well. As one explained, “writing skills help in management positions because as your career progresses there’s more e-mail correspondence, more internal communications…..”. Others referred to senior management’s responsibility to write performance evaluations, budgets, proposals, and reports. One participant summarized a recurring sentiment when she said, “the more responsibility a person has, the more communication skills are used. The need grows for written skills”. In short, industry managers need effective writing skills because their job duties require it.

A means of establishing a presence -- and credibility

Their career growth might also benefit from it. As one participant explained, “in management, writing is important because it allows you the opportunity to express who you are and what you think, even without meeting your reader”. In other words, writing well could provide recent graduates and industry professionals, particularly those in large organizations, with a chance to raise their profile in two ways.

First, virtually all the participants emphasized the importance of interpersonal skills; the ability to connect with others and project a favourable impression is essential in this people-oriented industry. One participant described it as “the lost art of establishing a presence”. Audience-centred writing, by its very definition, helps connect writer with reader and thus establish the former’s professional presence. This ability is particularly important in large operations where employees are geographically dispersed and therefore communicating electronically rather than face to face.

Second, writing is intrinsically linked to thinking. A disciplined writing practice fosters critical thinking and new perspectives – qualities that the participants cited as desirable for recently hired Hospitality and Tourism graduates. One participant described his objective at the Career Fair as “searching for a new set of eyes, a new perspective, someone who’s not afraid to put their opinion out there, to answer the question “what do you think?””. A graduate who writes well is more likely to have an articulate, thoughtful answer to that question than one who doesn’t because the act of writing prompts thinking and generates ideas.

Conclusion

The question “is writing important for graduate success?” is bound to elicit an affirmative response from faculty who teach writing. Our sense of purpose and dedication as educators derive from our strongly held belief in the value of writing – a value that extends beyond our students’ classrooms and into their careers.
But strongly held beliefs need to be regularly re-examined; otherwise, we run the risk of gazing fixedly in the rear view mirror, as a changing landscape rushes by. And, indeed, our gaze was redirected to that changing landscape when one participant dismissed the role of writing in the Hospitality and Tourism industry: “writing is becoming less and less important. Most of the written communication is online where (it has) shifted to sound bites”. From his perspective, the daily proliferation of work-related electronic text (short e-mails, text messages, forums) meant that writing had become synonymous with hastily composed, superficial “sound bites” with an audience more likely to scan than to read. Therefore he perceived writing as increasingly irrelevant to his professional life.

From the same facts, and based on our industry interviews, we draw the opposite conclusion. A proliferation of poorly written material, online and otherwise, points to the need for stronger writing skills. The industry needs employees who can address this challenge— and who can therefore garner for themselves and their industry all the benefits associated with strong writing skills, including greater professionalism, a more personalized service response and, most importantly, enhanced critical thinking skills.

To claim these benefits, however, the industry first needs to be aware of them. And that may be our biggest challenge: linking classroom learning to workplace needs. Such a direct link is, to the consternation of some post-secondary faculty, an important part of an applied business degree. This study represents a first step toward strengthening that link. The results obtained here will be used as the foundation for further research on communication competencies required in the hospitality and tourism workplace. The result should be a stronger curriculum, and therefore an enriched learning experience, for hospitality and tourism undergraduates.

References


