# Perceptions of Agricultural Industry Recruiters on Writing in the Workplace

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#### **Abstract**

This descriptive study focused on recruiters' perceptions of the importance of writing in the workplace and the writing abilities of the graduates of Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. These recruiters primarily represent for-profit organizations and recruit for business- and management-type positions in the United States. The majority of the Agricultural, Food, Environmental, and Natural Sciences Career Fair recruiters who responded reported that they took writing skills into consideration frequently or almost always. They assessed the writing abilities of graduates most frequently through written letter of application. In addition, recruiters indicated almost all of their employees have some responsibility for writing, and the most frequent type of writing is e-mail correspondence. Overall, recruiters reported that they were satisfied with the writing abilities of the graduates of the Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. Furthermore, the results of this study were comparable to the national study conducted by the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges in 2004. Based on the results of this study, the authors recommend faculty, staff, and administrators stay abreast of changing communication needs in the agricultural industry, incorporate writing skills into agricultural curriculum, and prepare students for workforce communication with real-world scenario writing assignments.

#### Introduction

In the 21st Century, communication skills have become a must in the workforce (National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2006). To increase awareness of the need for more writing in the workplace, the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges (NCoW) produced a series of reports reflecting the need for

writing in the workplace (NCoW, 2003; NCoW, 2004; NCoW, 2005; NCoW, 2006). According to NCoW (2003), "Writing is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many" (p. 11). The commission's 2004 report indicated the need for writing in the workforce, and its 2005 report explored the importance of writing in the government sector, which found that writing was more important in the American government sector than in the nongovernment area (NCoW, 2005). Andelt et al. (1997), Field (2001), and the National Commission on Writing (2004) indicated that if students are to be successful in the workplace and life, they must be able to write. However, in many cases, employers report graduates fall short in their communication skills (NACE, 2006).

Because today's students will become tomorrow's employees, Stevens (2005) assessed employers' satisfactions with graduates' writing abilities and found employers were not fully satisfied with graduates' business communications skills or workplace writing skills. Although employers indicated written skills were important skills for entry-level employees to possess (Andelt et al., 1997; Brand et al., 2006; Field, 2001), only few West Virginia University College of Agriculture, Forestry, and Consumer Sciences graduates had the communication skills employers desire (Brand et al., 2006).

Land-grant institutions were founded on the principle to educate rural students and provide them with not only technical skills but also basic skills, such as writing (Benjamin, 1962; Burnett and Tucker, 2001; McDowell, 2002; McDowell, 2003). "A professional education requires knowledge of the liberal arts to be complete" (Orr, 1996, p. 2831). Employers expect colleges and universities to equip students with both basic and technical skills and create writing friendly environments for students to develop and acquire written communication skills (Cassidy, 2006; NCoW, 2006). Furthermore, students want to obtain skills such as writing, so they can be

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more prepared for the workplace (Scanlon and Baxter, 1993).

As the communication needs of the industry continue to change, universities and colleges must adapt the curricula to meet those needs (Gerson and Gerson, 1994; Singh et al., 2004) and evaluate employers' perceptions of students' writing abilities (Stevens, 2005). "In an era when agricultural education is concerned with informing people about agriculture, faculty must ensure students are literate in the subject matter, have the skills to effectively communicate, and are successful in finding employment after graduation" (Garton and Robinson, 2006, p. 553).

Graduates' ability to write in the workplace may be the key to obtaining their dream jobs (NACE, 2006; Stewart, 1987). According to NACE Job Outlook 2006, employers seek strong communication skills more than any other skills in recent college graduates. Although some educators argue communication skills should not be taught outside the walls of an English classroom (Stewart, 1987), "... developing the kinds of thoughtful writers needed in business, and elsewhere in the nation's life, will require educators to understand writing as an activity calling for extended preparation across subject matters—from kindergarten through college" (NCoW, 2004, p. 20). Written communication should be a part of learning in all disciplines, not just English (Cassidy, 2006; Flowers and Reaves, 1991; NCoW, 2003; Smith et al., 1993; Stewart, 1987). Educators in agriculture have the responsibility to prepare students for the communication demands of the industry and provide students with the opportunities to improve their writing abilities (Flowers and Reaves, 1991; Stevens, 2005; Stewart, 1987).

The purpose of this study was to determine the 2000-2005 Agricultural, Food, Environmental, and Natural Sciences Career Fair recruiters' perceptions of the writing abilities of the graduates of Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. To accomplish this purpose, the researchers used the following objectives:

- 1. Describe selected characteristics of the Agricultural, Food, Environmental, and Natural Sciences Career Fair recruiters and recruiting organizations;
- 2. Determine the recruiters' perceptions of the importance of writing when recruiting new employees;
- 3. Determine the recruiters' perceptions of the frequency and types of writing required of recent college graduates in the recruiters' workplace; and
- 4. Determine recruiters' perceptions of the writing abilities of the graduates of Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources.

#### Methods

A descriptive instrument was used to survey

recruiters who participated in the Agricultural, Food, Environmental, and Natural Sciences Career Fair from 2000 to 2005 because of their familiarity with new college graduates. A database of the recruiters was obtained from Oklahoma State University Career Services. The researchers obtained 112 valid e-mail addresses of 142 individuals who recruited during this time frame. The response rate for the study was 30.36% (N = 34). When compared to similar studies, low response rates were consistent among employers (Irlbeck and Akers, 2009; Van Horn, 1995; Woratschek and Lenox, 2002). In a study that surveyed employers and coworkers of agricultural communications' graduates, Irlbeck and Akers (2009) had a 34.1% response rate. On a national writing study, the National Commission on Writing (2004) had a 16.6% response rate six weeks after the survey was distributed and 53.3% after a telephone follow-up.

Approval was obtained from the National Commission on Writing to use The Business Roundtable and National Writing Commission Human Resource Survey March 2004 as the basis for the development of the instrument for this study. The National Commission on Writing sought to determine what the respondents "thought was important about writing to explore what respondents actually do when hiring and promoting employees" (NCoW, 2004, p. 25). However, it did not make mention of the validity and reliability of the instrument (NCoW, 2004).

Most recruiters were determined to have e-mail addresses and Internet access; therefore, surveymonkey.com was used. Each recruiter received four e-mails—pre-notification e-mail, survey e-mail, follow-up e-mail, and second follow-up e-mail (Dillman, 2007), which contained the link to the questionnaire. The Web-based instrument contained three parts—organizational demographics, importance of writing skills in the recruitment process and the workplace, and recruiter demographics. Part One of the instrument identified the types of organizations that participated in the Agricultural, Food, Environmental, and Natural Sciences Career Fair; the types of positions for which they recruit; and the number of employees associated with the organization. Part Two of the instrument was related to the importance of writing in the agricultural industry and contained questions about the frequency and types of writing required of recent college graduates. Part Three of the instrument identified the demographics of the recruiter. Additionally, if the respondents graduated from Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, they were asked about their own writing education.

To determine validity, a panel of experts, consisting of eight university faculty and staff, reviewed the instrument (Dillman, 2007; Muijs, 2004). A pilot study was conducted using employers (N=50) who

did not recruit at the Agricultural, Food, Environmental, and Natural Sciences Career Fair from 2000 to 2005. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.87 for two summated scales, which is considered reliable (Muijs, 2004). The researchers visually compared the other items in the instrument to ensure reliability; as no differences were detected, no changes were made in the instrument.

#### **Results**

Objective one sought characteristics of the Agricultural, Food, Environmental, and Natural Sciences Career Fair recruiters and recruiting organizations from January 1, 2000, to December 31, 2005 (Table 1). Recruiters primarily represented "profit" (55.90%) organizations and hired for "management and business" (45.50%) positions. In addition, recruiters reported, as of January 1, 2006, they employed from 4 to 8,000 (n=26) individuals in the United States, and on average hired between 0 and 360 (n=25) employees annually from January 1, 2000, to December 31, 2005 (Table 2).

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Recruiters and Recruiting Organizations (N = 34)

	N	%
Nature of recruiting or ganizations		
Profit	19	55.9
Government	6	17.6
Education	5	14.7
Non-profit	4	11.8
Types of positions for which organizations hire		
Management and business	15	45.5
Agricultural forestry and production	7	21.2
Education, communication, and government	7	21.2
Scientific and engineering	4	12.1
Graduate of Oklahoma State University College of A	gricultural Sciences	and Natural
Resources		
Yes	5	18.5
No	22	81.5

Table 2. Means, Modes, and Medians of the Graduates of Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources Who Are Employed at the Recruiting Organizations Between January 1, 2000, and December 31, 2005

Employees	Min	Max	M	MO	MD
Employed on January 1, 2006					
Inside the United States	4	8,000	1,237.04	3,000.00	525.00
Outside the United States	0	500	48.36	0.00	0.00
Employees	Min	Max	M	MO	MD
Hired each year					
Inside the United States	4	350	81.72	35.00	35.00
Outside the United States	0	5	0.70	0.00	0.00
Hired each year who are Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural and Natural					
Resources graduates					
Inside the United States	0	10	2.07	0.00	1
Outside the United States	0	0	0	0	0

Objective two sought respondents' perceptions of the importance of writing when recruiting new employees including consideration of writing when hiring new employees, impact of a poorly composed

application letter or other written material when hiring, and how often samples of written materials or presentations are required of a job applicant (Table 3). Recruiters reported they "frequently" consider writing when hiring new college graduates as professional staff (M = 3.11; SD = 1.10) and hourly staff (M = 2.54; SD = 1.07). Additionally, a poorly composed application letter or other written material "frequently" has an impact when hiring professional staff (M = 3.48; SD = 0.70) and hourly staff (M =2.88: SD = 0.85). Recruiters indicated that a majority of the time they use the individual's letter/written application (82.10%) and personal communication with references (64.30%) to assess a job applicant's writing ability (Table 4). Furthermore, recruiters reported quality writing skills are worth between "\$2,501 and \$5,000" (M = 3.22; SD = 1.83); however, the large standard deviation indicates variation among the respondents.

Objective three sought to determine the frequency and types of writing required of a recent college graduate (Table 5). Recruiters reported

"almost all" professional staff employees have some responsibility for writing (M = 3.5; SD = 0.88) and "about 2/3rds" have effective communication characteristics (M = 3.37; SD =0.63). Whereas, "about 2/3rds" of hourly employees have responsibility for writing (M = 2.6; SD = 1.23)and "about 1/3rd" have effective communication characteristics (M = 2.24; SD = 0.88). Furthermore, recruiters reported employees "almost always" use email correspondence (M =3.78; SD = 0.42) and "frequently" use oral presentations with slides and visuals (M = 3.19; SD =0.68) (Table 6). Additionally, recruiters considered accuracy (M = 3.89; SD =0.32); clarity (M = 3.81; SD= 0.40); conciseness (M =3.74; SD = 0.45); and spelling, punctuation, and grammar (M = 3.67; SD =0.64) as "extremely important" communications characteristics (Table 7).

Objective four determined employers' percep-

tions of the writing abilities of the graduates of Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. Seven (46.50%)

Table 3. Means and Standard Deviations of the Employers' Perceptions of the Importance of Writing in the Workplace (N = 34)

	n	M	SD
Professional staff			
Impact of a poorly composed application letter or other written			
material when hiring	27	3.48	0.70
Consideration of writing skills when hiring new employees	28	3.11	1.10
Importance of effective writing skills when making promotion			
Decisions	25	2.96	0.79
Opportunities to improve writing skills when an employee possesses			
poor writing skills	26	2.35	1.06
Samples of written materials/presentations required of job applicant	29	2.07	1.10
Hourly staff			
Impact of a poorly composed job applicant's letter or other written			
material when hiring	24	2.88	0.85
Importance of effective writing skills when making promotion			
Decisions	23	2.61	0.94
Consideration of writing skills when hiring new employees	26	2.54	1.07
Opportunities to improve writing skills when an employee possesses			
poor writing skills	24	2.00	0.93
Samples of written materials/presentations required of job applicant	26	1.54	0.86
Note. Scale equals: one-few, two-about 1/3rd, three-about 2/3rds, four-	almost a	all.	

Table 4. Frequency and Forms of Assessing a Job Applicant's Writing Ability (N = 34)

	N	%
Impression based on letter/written application	23	82.1
Personal communication with references	18	64.3
Writing sample provided by job applicant	13	46.4
Review of coursework on résumé	11	39.3
Writing test taken during the job interview	3	10.7
Open Web forum (e.g., Facebook, MySpace, blogs, etc.)	2	7.1

Table 5. Means and Standard Deviations of Employers' Perceptions of Written Communication Practices in the Workplace For Professional and Hourly Staff (N = 34)

	N	M	SD
Professional staff			
Employees who have some responsibility for writing	28	3.50	0.88
Employees who have effective communication characteristics	27	3.37	0.63
Hourly staff			
Employees who have some responsibility for writing	25	2.60	1.23
Employees who have effective communication characteristics	25	2.24	0.88
Note. Scale equals: one—a few, two—about 1/3rd, three—about 2/3rds	s, four-alı	nost all.	

recruiters reported "almost all" agricultural graduates of Oklahoma State University had sufficient writing abilities, although the mean (M=2.87;SD=1.30) indicated "about 2/3rds" of these graduates were considered to have satisfactory writing abilities. Furthermore, recruiters reported they were "satisfied" with hired graduates' writing abilities (M=3.20;SD=0.68) and interviewed graduates' writing abilities (M=2.94;SD=0.74).

Last, recruiters (N=2) could provide additional comments regarding graduates of the Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. One recruiter commented, "I have been very pleased with the overall performance of the OSU graduates that I have hired." However, another commented, "I have not been pleased with the writing skills of our Oklahoma State University

College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources' graduates because I continually find myself spending time editing their work."

### Discussion, Conclusions and Recommendations

Due to the small response rate (30.36%), this study's findings may have rather limited generalizations beyond the participating sample, especially for items with relatively large standard deviations. However, as this study's results are comparable to the results reported by the National Commission on Writing (2004), they provide a beginning point for consideration when agricultural faculty review curricula as well as provide insight into the continuing need to improve writing education.

Career fair recruiters represent primarily profit organizations and recruit predominantly for business and management-type positions. Additionally, their organizations employ as many as 8,000 people and as few as four, and annually they hire an average of 81 employees, including, on average, two graduates from the Oklahoma State

University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources. The vast majority of these employees work in the United States.

Recruiters consider writing abilities an important part of the recruiting process and the workplace as they frequently take writing skills into consideration when hiring both professional and hourly staff. In fact, the respondents reported taking writing skills into consideration slightly more than do the companies of the Business Roundtable (NCoW, 2004), which has 160 member companies represented by their chief executive officers (Business Roundtable: About us, n.d.). The most frequently assessed item is the applicant's job application and accompanying business letter.

The vast majority of new agricultural college graduates are responsible for writing and using email correspondence in their jobs, which mirrors results of the national survey in 2004 (NCoW, 2004). Accuracy, clarity, conciseness, and correct grammar are the most important characteristics of effective communication, which parallels the National Commission on Writing 2004 study. However, recruiters indicated fewer employees have effective communications skills than the proportion responsible for writing in their positions.

Moreover, recruiters are satisfied with the writing abilities of Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources' graduates. In comparison, the National Commission on

Writing (2004) determined 65% of new college graduates have sufficient writing abilities, which is similar to the "about 2/3rds" reported for the Oklahoma State University College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources' graduates.

The researchers recommend faculty, staff, and administrators continue to stay abreast of the changing communication needs in the agricultural industry by assessing current writing curricula in the college, incorporating writing skills into agricultural curriculum, using writing as a way of learning, and preparing students for workforce communication with real-world scenario writing assignments. In addition, faculty should attend career fairs and participate in other networking opportunities to gain insights into the writing skills employers want graduates to possess. More research is needed to determine instructors' perceptions of graduates' writing abilities and evaluate graduates' satisfactions with their writing education.

According to Stevens (2005), this type of study should be replicated every five years. Assessing the communication needs of the agricultural industry can help close the gap between the skills of new college graduates and the needs of the industry (Andelt et al., 1997; Cassidy, 2006; Stevens, 2005). Therefore, Oklahoma State University's College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, as well as other agricultural colleges, should periodically conduct this type of study to ensure graduates meet the communication needs of the agricultural industry. Furthermore, agricultural colleges should assess current writing curricula, continue to incorporate basic writing skills into agricultural curricula, use

Table 6. Means and Standard Deviations of the Types of Writing and Frequency Performed on the Job (N=34)

	n	M	SD	
E-mail correspondence	27	3.78	0.42	
Oral presentations with slides/visuals (e.g., PowerPoint)	27	3.19	0.68	
Oral presentations without visuals	27	2.93	0.73	
Other memoranda and correspondence	27	2.89	0.85	
Formal reports	27	2.81	0.96	
Technical reports	27	2.74	0.86	
Web text	26	2.42	0.99	
Note. Scale equals: one–almost never, two–occasionally, three–frequently, four–almost always.				

Table 7. Means and Standard Deviations of the Importance of Effective Communication Characteristics (N=34)

	n	M	SD
Accuracy	27	3.89	0.32
Clarity	27	3.81	0.40
Conciseness	27	3.74	0.45
Spelling, punctuation, and grammar	27	3.67	0.64
Visual appeal	26	3.38	0.64
Scientific precision	25	3.28	0.74

*Note*. Scale equals: one–not at all important, two–not very important, three–important, four–extremely important.

writing as a way of learning, and prepare students for workforce communication by giving them more realworld scenario writing assignments.

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