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Employer Perceptions of the Skills Gap in College Graduates' Written Communication

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

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Julie Minnaugh

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Walden University

2023

Abstract

Employer Perceptions of the Skills Gap in College Graduates' Written Communication

by

Julie Minnaugh

MA, Boston University, 2007

BA, University of New Hampshire, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

March 2023

Abstract

U.S. employers have reported that many college graduates are underprepared in written communication when hired and that lack of preparedness hinders these graduates' employment success. Higher education institution (HEI) administrators need information regarding which writing skills should be taught across the curriculum to improve student outcomes. The purpose of this study was to investigate employers' perspectives on the written communication skills gap that hinders college graduates from being successful in their professional practice. Swales's six characteristics of a discourse community provided a conceptual lens for the study, as graduates commencing employment represent newcomers to a discourse community. A basic qualitative study design was used. Semistructured interviews were conducted with 10 employer participants who manage recently graduated new hires. Qualitative coding was used to identify themes for analysis. Results of the study point to practices such as following a methodical approach to writing practice; prioritizing audience research and needs; and emphasizing self-awareness, confidence, and thoroughness among new hires. HEI administrators should prioritize common conventions, but also strategies for uncovering audience needs and disciplinary conventions. Doing so may decrease the perceived gap in graduates' written communication skills and improve hiring prospects and professional success for recently graduated new hires. Improvements in these areas may contribute to positive social change by improving employment outcomes for college graduates, which is particularly important given the time and money that learners invest in education.

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my mom and dad, who supported my education and career success through their hard work and influence. My gratitude also goes to my husband, Michael, and my boys, Caeleb and Mac, who have cheered me on and patiently allowed me time each week to read and write. I cannot wait to give you a much larger share of my time and attention now that I have completed this dissertation.

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Table 1. Themes and Subthemes69

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

This aim of this study was to help administrators of online higher education institutions (HEIs) in the United States to better understand how to develop instruction and assessment around written communication in standard curriculum. The skills gap in written communication has long been a concern for HEI stakeholders and for employers (AAC&U, 2018; Kleckner & Butz, 2021; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). There is extensive documentation of written communication as a top in-demand skill in the workforce. I conducted this study to address a gap in practice related to the variability of employer expectations for what constitutes effective writing. Researchers have indicated that a challenge in meeting the needs of the workforce is that when asked, employers surface a broad and varied number of skills (Coffelt et al., 2019; Moore & Morton, 2017). I will expand on this idea in greater detail in the background section that follows.

This study has the potential to contribute a new area of knowledge related to professional writing dispositions and behaviors that promote adaptive approaches to writing. Enhancing skill sets of graduates around writing may contribute to positive social change by removing barriers to employment and professional success. Researchers report that gaps evident in written communication impact hiring outcomes for applicants (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Hastings et al., 2020; Martin-Lacroux, & Lacroux, 2017). In this chapter, I will provide background information on the study, review the problem statement and purpose of the study, introduce the research question, and describe the concept that grounded the study. The nature of the study, with associated assumptions,

scope and delimitations, and limitations, will be detailed as well. The chapter will conclude with the aspects of the study that may support the advancement of disciplinary knowledge on written communication curriculum needs at online higher education institutions.

Background

In several recent studies, researchers have sought to understand the aspects of written communication that are most in demand among employers, as well as those written communication skills that employers feel are most lacking in recently graduated new employees (American Association of Colleges and Universities [AAC&U], 2018; Kleckner & Butz, 2021; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). Researchers have struggled to pinpoint what “good writing” means to employers, citing a broad range of distinct writing qualities as well as significant variability between individual respondents (Coffelt et al., 2019). Qualities such as accuracy of spelling, grammar, and mechanics are most often cited, as well as a writer’s ability to respond effectively to unique conventions (Clokier & Fourie, 2016; Coffelt et al., 2019; Hastings et al., 2020; Kleckner & Butz, 2021; Moore & Morton, 2017; Schartel Dunn, & Lane, 2019). Further complexity is introduced by research demonstrating that various aspects of identity impact how one perceives good writing, including tacit rules and conventions within one’s professional community (Swales, 1990), generational differences (Moss, 2018), and raciolinguistic biases (Baker-Bell, 2020; Flores & Rosa 2015).

These complexities suggest that employers' judgments about the quality of employees' writing are at least somewhat limited in their validity. This variability in writing expectations means that graduates will be regularly challenged in their professional roles to adapt to new discourse communities where the rules governing written communication may not necessarily be a topic of training (Succi & Wieandt, 2019) or even consciously understood as unique by their managers and colleagues (Moore & Morton, 2017). Adaptation occurs in the execution of the writing process itself, as new employees strive to produce a writing product that suits a particular professional need. These two ideas suggest a gap in practice related to a lack of understanding about behaviors and dispositions that support graduates in producing writing products that will be interpreted as effective. Qualitative research is needed in this area to explore behaviors and dispositions that managers associate with effective writing. Previous studies have been focused on documenting in-demand skills. However, since those skills vary so broadly depending on the employer and professional setting, behaviors and dispositions may contribute to a new hire's ability to uncover what constitutes effective writing in a specific situation. The study is also needed to inform administrator decisions about what and how to cover related to written communication across the curriculum, to better prepare graduates to meet hiring and work demands.

Problem Statement

Employers have reported that many U.S. college graduates are underprepared with regard to written communication when hired, therefore hindering their employment

success (AAC&U, 2018; Khoo et al., 2020). Employers across a range of professional fields list written communication at the top of their skills' needs (AAC&U, 2018; Kleckner & Butz, 2021; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). A significant gap between employers' demand for written communication skills in their recently graduated new hires and employers' perceptions of graduate preparedness is noted as a problem across employer research. For example, AAC&U (2018) found that 76% of U.S. business executives and 78% of hiring managers said that written communication was very important, but only 33% of business executives and 45% of hiring managers believed that recent grads were well prepared to communicate through writing at work. Similarly, MacDermott and Ortiz (2017) found that fewer than 30% of employers surveyed felt graduates were prepared, noting written communication as a significant concern. According to Kleckner and Butz (2021), in an analysis of 57 communication skills ranked by regional employers, only the variable "write clearly and precisely" both increased in importance and decreased in satisfaction from 2015 to 2018 (p. 414). This change occurred despite curricular adjustments that the researchers' institution made to address this specific skill in business communication course outcomes in response to the 2015 data.

Educator and employer concerns about college graduates' writing ability is occurring amid rapid communication technology changes. Such changes have ruptured conventions in business communication that colleges and universities must continually track and account for in curricula (Clokie & Fourie, 2016). Although rapid technology

advances affected the workforce prior to 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated immediate and unplanned mass adaptation to remote communication that has significantly changed how many individuals work. According to Lindzon (2020), in the pandemic remote workforce where traditional modes of professional communication have been disrupted, writing ability has now become the most in demand of all professional skills. In the sudden absence of in-person meetings and conversations in passing, workers have increasingly relied upon technology such as email, asynchronous threads, and messaging tools to support internal and external communication.

Another concern for employers, amid the increasing prevalence of online communication, is that the workforce might be fragmented in attitudes about communication, in particular written communication. At the advent of the pandemic, the U.S. workforce was becoming increasingly generationally diverse (Moss, 2018). There are differences across generations in communication styles and attitudes about communication technologies (Schartel Dunn & Lane, 2019). These recent situational forces have clarified the need to understand how written communication skills are perceived and understood by individuals in various roles across the workforce.

Beyond putting new hires at risk for being potential liabilities to their employer's reputation (Hastings et al., 2020), perceived gaps in written communication can keep job-seeking graduates from obtaining an interview in the first place. In some fields, soft skills (ex. communication, teamwork, and professionalism) are considered as important or more important than hard skills (field-specific technical or administrative skills) in the

eyes of employers (DeLong & Elbeck, 2018). Of the soft skills, written communication skills are the first to be evident to employers, as hiring managers typically review written application materials such as resumes and cover letters before job seekers are able to meet with them in person. Research shows that hiring managers have high expectations of written communication in application materials and that perceived errors negatively affect hiring decisions (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Hastings et al., 2020; Martin-Lacroux, & Lacroux, 2017).

Given the increased importance of written communication as an in-demand skill, there is a need to address graduates' underpreparedness to effectively communicate in writing on the job. There is also a consensus among researchers that the serious negative impacts of perceived poor writing skills on hiring decisions need to be explored (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Hastings et al., 2020; Martin-Lacroux, & Lacroux, 2017). Another underexplored topic concerns that complexities related to how good writing is perceived in the pandemic economy. In this context, administrators in HEIs are called upon to increase their awareness of the causes and issues related to the written communication skills gap so that they can increase the efficacy of academic training in written communication across programmatic pathways.

The employer research indicates that students across undergraduate programs need better preparation in written communication that is aligned to employer needs in the pandemic workplace (AAC&U, 2018; Coffelt et al., 2019; Schartel Dunn & Lane, 2019,

p. 211). However, there is limited information to help administrators understand gaps in students' written communication skills . Topics for additional study include

- how students “glean from company culture which communication skills are most important” (Schartel Dunn & Lane, 2019, p. 211),
- how the kinds of writing activities and expectations that graduates will encounter in the professional world vary (Moore & Morton, 2017),
- how writing skill needs may differ for different forms of professional writing (Neil & Schauster, 2015),
- whether employers perceive a written communication skills gap because students may not be effectively transferring prior learning (Coffelt et al., 2019),
- why some skills are privileged and who benefits from these skills (Coffelt et al., 2019), and
- whether self-reported gains in students' writing confidence and flexibility transfer after they participate in an instructional intervention foster professional success with communication in the field (Fulmer et al., 2020).

This study may address a gap in practice by deepening understanding of the written communication skills college graduates need to be successful in their professional practice.

The institution addressed in this study has a social mobility mission. As an open-enrollment university, it does not require SATs or placement tests as part of student

admissions and enrollment. It serves a diverse student population. Within the online division, a standard curriculum model is employed, which means that course outcomes, assessments, and formative pathways are designed in partnership between a subject matter expert and curriculum and instructional designers. In contrast to higher education settings where faculty design their own courses, this relative consistency in design approach provides significant opportunities for supporting writing development across the curriculum, as writing across the curriculum (WAC) scaffolding practices could, with coordinated effort, be adopted as course development standards.

More information about what kinds of employee writing behaviors are associated with effective writing by their managers may help inform relatively new WAC efforts at the institution. Enhanced knowledge may support efforts to make and validate curriculum recommendations for colleagues across disciplines, as well as curriculum and instruction leaders and personnel. Deans and faculty regularly describe frustration with encountering ineffective student writing. For example, in a discussion of skills that need more support in online programs within the social sciences department, a Psychology dean colleague noted that writing skills, including citation and mechanics, are an area where students tend to struggle. She also indicated that these are likely issues not just within psychology programs but across the university. A recent focus group led by one of the deans within the composition team confirmed this assumption, as deans across subject-matter areas confirmed that skills such as paragraph and sentence organization and the effective integration of research needed increased curricular support. In conversations with

members of institutional advisory boards, employers also describe skill gaps in written communication for recently graduated new hires. In a discussion regarding the most important skills from an employer perspective to meet the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, a liberal arts advisory board member described effective writing skills and communication with different constituencies as key skills. In conclusion, written communication more critical than ever for college students to learn in their degree pathway, and administrators need more information to make effective curriculum decisions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate employers' perspectives on the written communication skills gap that hinders college graduates from being successful in their professional practice. Of particular interest were the behaviors that graduates exhibit in new writing situations that may support their ability to meet their managers' writing expectations. Unlike studies that have asked what skills are lacking based on perceptions of writing products (e.g., Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Hastings et al., 2020; Martin-Lacroux, & Lacroux, 2017), this study featured researcher-developed semi structured, qualitative interviews to explore employer perspectives on skills related to writing practice observed in graduates who managers considered to be effective writers. The study findings demonstrate how effective writers respond effectively to varying writing expectations. In this way, the study brings academic and industry scholarship on genre studies and writing process into productive dialogue.

Research Question

Administrators are challenged to infuse writing instruction across the curriculum in ways that will support graduates in effectively meeting each new writing situation. In this study, I gathered and analyzed perspectives from employers in a variety of professional fields about effective writers on their teams. These perspectives provide details about the most critical skills and dispositions held by effective writers, as well as important information about their writing approach and process. The research question for this study was, how do employers describe the written communication skills gap that hinders college graduates from being successful in their professional practice?

Conceptual Framework

In qualitative research, a conceptual framework typically frames the various aspects of study (Walden University, 2021). Swales's (1990) six characteristics of a discourse community provided the conceptual framework for this study. As described by Swales, discourse communities are groups of people who develop their own genres of writing, conventions, and "lexis" that are often opaque to those outside of the community and learned through participation in the community. The concept of the discourse community is a useful lens with which to study employer perceptions of written communication skills because organizations within disciplinary fields, and further, teams within those organizations, represent discourse communities. This is the case because they reflect the six characteristics Swales proposed. Graduates commencing employment within these organizations represent newcomers to a discourse community. These six

characteristics, plus the ways that they affect newcomers to a particular discourse community, are detailed in Chapter 2.

In using discourse communities as the framework for this framework, I sought to focus the inquiry on whether specific prewriting behaviors and approaches to new writing situations are associated with good writing. Interview questions were carefully crafted to avoid jargon or assumptions from two scholarly areas: composition and rhetoric studies, and employer research. The questions included topics such as commonly used writing forms, observed features of an effective writing product, writing behaviors and dispositions observed in effective writers, and manager perceptions about recently graduated new hire writers.

Nature of the Study

The existence of a skill gap in written communication is well documented (AAC&U, 2018; Kleckner & Butz, 2021; MacDermitt & Ortiz, 2017). However, several complexities related to how good writing is perceived have created opportunities for further research into what kinds of supporting writing behaviors administrators observe in recently graduated new hires that they consider to be effective writers. According to Crawford (2020), qualitative researchers “describe some phenomenon as experienced by individuals or groups” (p. 82) by gathering participant perspectives as data. Although quantitative data are available that document the existence of a writing skills gap (e.g., AAC&U, 2018; MacDermitt & Ortiz, 2017), researchers have called for further study to better understand how the skills gap is perceived by employers. In previous studies,

hiring managers have struggled to articulate needs beyond “good” and “clear” writing (Coffelt et al., 2019; Schartel et al., 2019; Moore & Morton, 2017). In my review of the literature, I found no research regarding writers’ observed behaviors and processes related to generating professional writing. These insights may provide a new understanding about the phenomenon of the writing skills gap. The information-seeking in this study was exploratory in nature. I conducted interviews to gather data to answer the study’s research question. When the research question is exploratory, a qualitative study in which the researcher conducts interviews to gather data is the appropriate research design (Keen, 2018). As I further discuss in Chapter 3, I used a basic qualitative design. The data were analyzed using qualitative coding, with several iterations of coding to draw out concepts and themes.

Definitions

The following definitions and terms are used in this study:

Advisory board: A group of industry-based consultants convened by administrators for the purpose of gathering field-based knowledge for informing improvements to program outcomes and content (Mello, 2019).

Discourse community: A group of writers and readers who are aligned in communication by a tacit set of modality and language conventions (Swales, 1990).

Employers: Agents acting on behalf of an employer as defined by 29 U.S. Code § 630 (n. d.).

New employees: An individual who has joined the organization within the last 12-36 months. The Society for Human Resource Management considers employees to be new employees until they have completed their first year with the organization (Maurer, 2022).

Online higher education institutions: Universities and colleges that either consist of entirely distance education offerings or have a significant division dedicated to distance education. Distance education is defined by Seaman et al. (2018) as “education that uses one or more technologies to deliver instruction to students who are separated from the instructor and to support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor synchronously or asynchronously” (p. 5).

Recently graduated: Individuals who have graduated from a 4-year undergraduate degree within the last 12-48 months. This definition is consistent with that of the Society for Human Resources Management (Miller, 2019).

Assumptions

Employers were the preferred participants for this study about recently graduated new hire written communication. There are certainly other relevant stakeholder populations to the phenomenon—I also considered college administrators, students, and alumni. In assessing the literature, I determined that employers (specifically, managers) would be the most reliable source of information for helping to clarify employer needs around written communication. This was established by process of elimination. In studies, college administrators have appeared to conflict with employers with regard to

their confidence in their institutions' ability to prepare graduates for writing on the job (MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). However, this is not the only area where perspectives appear to conflict. Researchers have also suggested that graduates overestimate their writing skills (Arputhamalar & Kannan, 2017; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; Wilson et al., 2018), suggesting that students or alumni were not the ideal participants for this research. Employers who served on advisory boards for the institution where I work were the participant population for this study.

By selecting members of advisory boards for a range of academic disciplines as participants, I assumed that the experiences they shared would be varied enough across professional settings to allow me to surface themes that are broadly applicable across industry. This cannot be demonstrated as true. However, it was an assumption that was necessary for this study because it was not feasible to speak to the entire population of individuals who have experienced the writing and prewriting behaviors of recently graduated new hires. This study provides one set of data and analysis that ideally will be able to be assessed alongside future studies of a similar nature to help advance what is known about the phenomena of the written communication skills gap.

Scope and Delimitations

In this study, I focused on recently graduated new employees' behaviors and dispositions around writing, a topic that has not yet been explored in the employer research literature. The decision to focus on behaviors and dispositions was informed by my experience as a curriculum designer, which helped me to see that these elements were

missing from current employer research. In my work as a curriculum designer, I learned to develop outcomes or competencies by seeking to uncover not only knowledge and skills, but also the behaviors and dispositions that are necessary for a learner to demonstrate a particular competency. These elements are intended to help students transfer knowledge from their academic setting to their work.

This study was bounded by its focus population, as well as its specific conceptual frame. The populations included in the study were employers working within the United States who have managed recently graduated new employees within the last 5 years. I did not select executives or hiring managers, as they are not in a position to observe recently hired graduates in the ways that managers are. My intent was to gather participants from a range of professional disciplines, while also assembling a participant pool that was diverse in terms of generational membership and race. The information yielded from the study has the potential for transferability for online HEIs serving student populations across the United States who seek employment in diverse regional economies and professional communities. The study specifically focused on online HEIs because of the element of standardized curriculum, which enables administrators to have significant influence on the specific skills that are covered and how they are covered across the learning pathway. Brick-and-mortar institutions that also employ a standardized curriculum approach may also appreciate the information shared.

I did not focus on in-depth or other in-demand soft-skills in constellation with written communication, such as oral communication, critical thinking and problem

solving, or collaboration. These skills are prominent in employer research scholarship pertaining to skills gaps. However, some of these skills did come up in interview discussions about behaviors and dispositions that employers observed in employees they considered to be effective written communicators. There are a significant number of recent studies (see Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Coffelt et al., 2019; Hastings et al., 2020; Moore & Morton, 2017; Scharrel Dunn, & Lane, 2019) that address what writing skills employers consider to be most critical or the skills they consider to be most lacking, so I did not seek to reinvestigate that topic. Rather, I delved deeper into situations where employer expectations around written communication had been met, to uncover skills and behaviors demonstrated by effective writers.

Limitations

This study has a few potential limitations related to the study design. I interviewed employers who are associated with my HEI through service on various disciplinary advisory boards or through the employer partnerships department. There was some possibility that employers would feel pressure to respond in ways that support social desirability or provide responses that are biased by a personal agenda related to their relationship with the organization. By focusing on employers' positive experiences, I hoped to decrease the likelihood that participants would feel the need to provide responses to questions that would make them uncomfortable or could be perceived as putting them at risk in terms of status with the university. To follow the ethical guidelines of Walden University (2021), I conducted recruitment, informed consent, and data

collection anonymously. By following these research best practices, I sought to mitigate threats to study validity associated with these potential limitations. Chapter 3 contains more discussion of validity.

Significance

The significance of this research primarily lies in its potential to generate knowledge relevant for the improvement of online university WAC practices. The results of this study may help to fill a gap in practice by providing insight on changes that stakeholders can make to university curricula to promote improved outcomes in students' written communication. The study sheds new light on critical competencies related to the writing process and practice that are not evident in studies focused on employer feedback regarding writing product or perceived skills. The findings help clarify for HEI administrators how current approaches to supporting writing skills across the curriculum can be improved. This study contributes to positive social change because improved graduate written communication skills decrease the barriers to employability described in the literature. The financial risks that learners take on in completing an undergraduate degree have only increased. According to Sommer (2020), college costs for tuition and fees in the United States increased 570% between 1982 and 2011. Student debt also increased, with an important milestone reached in 2018, when more than \$1.5 trillion in student debt was outstanding. The student loan debt crisis has resulted in millennials delaying marriage and more frequently living with parents, as well as delaying purchase of cars and homes (Sommer, 2020). Loan payments are a significant monthly financial

commitment. In one survey, students who graduated between 2007 and 2008 reported making average monthly payments in the \$400-500 range (Cominole et al., 2021). Any barriers that graduates face while seeking employment and promotion within their chosen professional fields present an associated barrier for loan repayment as well. In conclusion, improving the approach to the critical skill of written communication in curricula has the potential to improve graduate career and financial futures.

Summary

Through the conceptual lens of discourse communities, I sought to further develop the scholarship related to written communication as an in-demand professional skill. My broader aim was to support higher education administrators responsible for standard curriculum in producing relevant training for undergraduate students. Prior researchers have asked employers about the most needed skills and those that they find most lacking in recent graduates (AAC&U, 2018; Kleckner & Butz, 2021). In this study, I sought to provide more information about how graduates successfully adapt to new professional discourse communities by exploring employers' descriptions of effective writing behaviors and dispositions. The writing skills that employers describe are not generalizable because they are mediated by aspects of identity and lived experience. A review of the literature on employer research related to written communication follows, including aspects of identity that mediate how individuals perceive quality in written communication.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter includes a review of the literature about the written communication skills gap among new hires with college degrees, as documented in employer research (AAC&U, 2018; Coffelt et al., 2019; Kleckner & Butz, 2021). I review stakeholder perspectives and issues related to the skills gap. Areas focused on in the review include employer perspectives about specific elements of written communication that are in demand but lacking in recent graduates, employers' recommendations to HEIs for addressing students' written communication skills, current approaches at HEIs to mitigate the written communication skills gap, student perspectives of their written communication skills, and social and cultural aspects that mediate how written communication quality is perceived. Before reviewing the literature, I describe the literature search strategy and conceptual framework for the study.

Literature Search Strategy

I conducted research in the Walden University online library and other online libraries using the electronic resources and databases ERIC, Academic Search Ultimate, Business Source Ultimate, and Google Scholar. I also used a general Google search to review several industry reports and articles on the topic of in-demand soft skills and written communication. During the library research phase, I applied Boolean operators “and” and “or” to broaden and narrow the search. The following keywords were used to cover the breadth of the research topic: *employer, hiring, skills gap, undergraduate, higher education, writing, writing skills, written communication, grammar, bias, African*

American Vernacular English, racial discrimination, generational differences, and advisory boards. 49 sources were used in this literature review. The literature review is organized into subsections on the following topics: industry perspectives on college graduates' writing skills, HEI perspectives on writing as a curricular component, student perspectives on their writing ability, responsibility for writing training, linguistic background differences, language and generational differences, and the role of advisory boards in online higher education. The articles and other resources referenced in this research are primarily from the time frame of 2018 to 2022. This study was underpinned by a conceptual framework that served to ground the inquiry and frame the study.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was Swales's (1990) six characteristics of a discourse community. Swales is a linguist who studies writing genres and the impact of group behavior on newcomers to the group. He introduced the idea that discourse communities develop their own genres of writing, conventions, and lexis that are often opaque to those outside of the community and learned through participation in the community. The six characteristics that Swales proposed are

- Public goals: The group has a common purpose that they work towards together.
- Specific communication tools: There are one or more main accepted forms of communication, such as email, newsletter, webpage, and so forth.

- Participation enacted through writing: Members of the community participate in membership through the exchange of written communication.
- Genres: Specific types of writing accepted within the group. Elements that make up genre include the kinds of topics that are welcomed for discussion and the types of information that are considered valid evidence to support claims.
- Lexis: The vocabulary used in common by the group, which may include acronyms and words that may not have the same meaning outside of the community.
- A threshold number of participants made up of novices and veterans.

Swales demonstrated common issues that arise when a newcomer to a discourse community attempts to communicate without adjusting their written communication approach for the six characteristics. He did this by describing his own experiences with a discourse community to which he was an outsider: a stamp collecting hobbyist group. The group's central site of communication was a regular newsletter journal where members contributed articles. Swales described the negative reaction of individuals within the community to an article he had shared, in which he applied a data analysis tool from applied linguistics called "frequency analysis" to pose an opinion on the debated origins of a particular rare stamp. One participant dismissed his research as "too clever by half" (pp. 27-28), a British colloquialism that conveys annoyance at an individual who may be overly confident in their own intelligence and overstepping their bounds. Another

participant made it clear that a physical chemical analysis was the only acceptable evidence to support the claim that Swales had made about the origins of the rare stamp (p. 28). In short, because Swales used a data analysis approach common within his field of linguistics that was not used to support opinions within stamp collecting community message boards, his communication was met with dismissal and rejection by community members.

Throughout the literature review, I will discuss several groups that meet the six characteristics of a discourse community. Professional organizations are one type of discourse community, whereas disciplinary faculty groups (business, composition and rhetoric; psychology; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics [STEM], to name a few) represent others. Millennial college graduates now participating in professional discourse communities in the workforce may also participate within social interest groups on Facebook or other social media platforms like the stamp collecting community described by Swales. They have also, by definition, recently left the academic discourse communities at their HEIs.

The relevance of Swales's work is in its relationship to negative written communication outcomes described by Swales. Swales's (1990) lack of credibility within the stamp collecting discourse community raises questions about the role and impact of discourse communities on employer feedback related to written communication. The tone of the stamp collectors who provided feedback on Swales's contribution resembles some of the responses documented in employer research (Coffelt

et al., 2019; Moore & Morton, 2017). The method of gathering evidence that Swales described in his article to support his perspective likely would have been seen as credible within Swales's linguistics field. Because of this, I surmised that the six characteristics of the discourse community might be helpful in better understanding and addressing the written communication skills gap indicated in employer research.

Further evidence of the relevance of discourse communities in this discussion can be found in Hastings et al. (2020), who described a hesitance among new employees to ask questions about expectations of their employers. Several researchers have demonstrated new hires' lack of awareness of how writing expectations may differ from the academic sphere they have recently left to the professional roles they now inhabit (e.g., Coffelt et al., 2019; Hastings et al., 2020; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; Moore & Morton, 2017; Schartel Dunn, & Lane, 2019). The rejection risk made plain by Swales (1990) in his stamp collecting community example seems tangential to the Hastings et al.'s assertion that "a context involving tacit rules and high stakes for appropriate adherence to them creates the need for a clear understanding of where new employees fall short" (p. 207). In the case of graduates, the need for security and success in new professional roles and the pressure to pay down accumulated student loan debt accrued in preparation for those roles make gainful employment a high-stakes endeavor for them and for the dependents within their care.

Researchers have drawn upon Swales work in discourse communities and genre analysis as a lens through which to better understand and improve approaches to

preparing students to write in professional settings. For example, in *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*, Dias et al. (1999) discussed the differences and resulting learning barriers that come about as students transition from writing in academic settings where their learning is a primary focus, to workplaces, where they learn as a byproduct of creating “real” deliverables within stakeholder time constraints and specifications. Dias et al. conducted interviews with interns new to various professional roles to explore many issues that threatened to limit learning transfer or promote ineffective learning transfer. The emphasis in the book was on places where learning had failed, likely due to a lack of preparation for the ways that the interns would need to learn to write on the job versus how they had become accustomed to learning to write at school. One of these differences was the contrast between the role clarity of student and faculty member and the varied, often uncommunicated expectations of managers. Other contrasts included explicit learning goals in the classroom versus learning as an expected byproduct of working in a new professional environment, feedback from faculty to justify grading versus feedback from managers as calls to action, and the solitary and final nature of generating a document as an assignment submission versus the collaborative and iterative nature of many professional genre documents. Dias et al. recommended, as a means of reducing the gaps resulting from these differences of context, that educators provide opportunities for more sustained collaborative group projects that more closely mimicked workplace writing (Dias et al., 1999).

Playing on Dias et al.'s (1999) *Worlds Apart: Acting and Writing in Academic and Workplace Contexts*, Morton (2016) reimagined the contexts of academic and professional writing as “adjacent worlds” in her genre analysis of a common writing product in architecture education, the desk-crit. Because many faculty within the architecture field are directly involved in industry, their existence in teaching roles means that they participate in both academic and professional discourse communities and therefore demonstrate that these communities are not as far apart in some disciplinary fields as others. A takeaway from this ethnographic study was the need for educators to provide opportunities for students to think through and discuss the differences they encounter in terms of “values and practices” (p. 62) held by writers working within the various communities.

As applied to this study, Swales's (1990) six characteristics of a discourse community suggests that a hiring manager's assessment of written communication is mediated by the specific genres and conventions of the professional discourse community to which they belong. Additionally, it provides some support for the idea that writing skills and process training learned by graduates within academic contexts and effective for academic purposes may not be accepted as good or effective in their new professional discourse communities. The studies mentioned here that have made use of Swales's work also provide some helpful context for formulating research and interview questions, suggesting added relevance and need for questions not just about how managers perceive

the writing product of their new employees, but also any observable writing behaviors and dispositions that have supported writing products that were perceived to be effective.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts and Variables

On the topic of written communication and college graduate employability, there are several key stakeholder groups with important perspectives. Moreover, there are certain identity variables that impact those perspectives. Employers are a population of interest for research about graduate skill preparedness because it is important to understand their perspective as individuals with significant power over graduate success and earning potential within the various industries. HEI administrators make up another significant group, since their understanding of student preparedness with writing skills as they matriculate, as well as which writing skills are the most impactful for focus and how they are most effectively threaded throughout curriculum, have a significant bearing on how prepared students will be for professional writing upon graduating. Graduates retain their own distinct perspectives about their own writing skills and the relative importance of written communication in their future professional fields. Among all of these populations, identity features such as age and linguistic background serve as a lens that mediates perspectives about both individual examples of writing products and general attitudes about what makes good writing.

Industry Perspectives on College Graduates' Writing Skills

Written communication is regularly noted as an in-demand skill in employer surveys, and one that is often noted as lacking in recent graduates. There are many

studies that seek to determine the communication skills employers value most. Coffelt et al. (2019) is a notable example, because the researchers indicated 26 separate themes related to the skill of written communication, and further, described a significant challenge: some participants were unable to qualify or further unpack what they meant by “good grammar” or “writing well,” suggesting that there may be a high degree of variability and subjectivity from one hiring manager to the next.

Among documented themes related to written communication as an in-demand skill, participants across several studies referenced a need for accuracy with conventional spelling, grammar, and mechanics, and the ability to produce work free of typographical errors (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Coffelt et al., 2019; Hastings et al., 2020; Moore & Morton, 2017; Schartel Dunn, & Lane, 2019). A reason provided by survey participants in Clokie and Fourie (2016) was that accuracy in application materials suggested that a graduate in an entry-level role could be trusted to proofread emails to clients or other stakeholders rather than rely on application-based checkers alone to catch errors. The inverse, that perceived errors on application materials suggest that if hired, the applicant would not apply adequate care and attention to communications representing the organization in the future, is supported by other studies noted in the problem section of this research paper.

Effective persuasion in written communication was noted in employer research as well, though expectations varied. Some employers surveyed believed that graduates should be able to generate effective professional writing in a specific genre, such as

advertising copy or social media posts, on the first day of the job (Clokie & Fourie, 2016). Others valued critical thinking around audiences' needs, as such a skill would enable graduates to generate persuasive writing to suit any future context (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). Participants in Moore and Morton's (2017) study on employer perceptions of graduate writing noted that while they had graduate new hires who were able to write clear and error-free communications, those communications were not aligned with the conventions held by the professional community to which they had become a new member. Clokie and Fourie (2016) provided possible reasoning around why this might be the case. In this study, two of the participants shared perspectives consistent with Swales 1990 theory of discourse communities: that conventions around what kind of writing is considered effective or persuasive varies greatly across brands and industries, and new hires must adapt their writing approaches to new conventions. It could follow that rather than studying and practicing one or two genres common within a particular industry (ex. a business letter or executive summary), graduates may be better served by assignments designed to help them develop a personal approach to *pre-writing*, including habits such as conducting effective audience and convention research and engaging in adequate questioning, listening, and learning prior to planning a draft. Moore and Morton (2017) advocated for this approach based on their findings. However, this researcher was unable to find any recent employer survey in the literature that sought to understand pre-writing behaviors observed in graduates who were effective writers.

The noted emphasis on flexibility in writing approach prompted some review of the literature on flexibility as an employer-requested skill. Andrade and Ziegner (2021) uncovered a lack of coverage and assessment of flexibility and adaptability though they are useful in the workplace. Andrade and Ziegner then expressed concern about low graduate awareness about the importance of flexibility as a general professional competency. Notably, flexibility was identified as a key skill for managing intergenerational teams (Smith & Garriety, 2020). The impact of generational differences on perception of quality of written communication is discussed later in this review. The limited curricular focus on flexibility as a generic or general skill may be contributing to a specific lack of writing flexibility skills in graduates.

Higher Education Perspectives on Writing as a Curricular Component

Many studies about employer needs that focus on or include written communication conclude by discussing recommendations for colleges and universities regarding curriculum and instruction in writing. A common recommendation is that HEIs find ways to more intentionally thread written communication skills into courses across program curricula at various levels beyond first-year composition (Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Clokie & Fourie, 2016; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; Stewart, 2021). Recommendations such as these over the years have applied steady pressure on HEIs to reflect these changes (Moore & Morton, 2017). Research has also been devoted to understanding which writing skills are currently taught in bachelor's programs, how they align to industry needs, and how frequently they are treated in the curriculum. Following

the initial phase of Clokie and Fourie (2016), in which employers named some specific features they felt were necessary for effective professional writing, the researchers analyzed communication-focused courses at a university for the frequency of these features. They found that although accuracy of grammar and mechanics and contextual flexibility emerged as a common employer response, few of the course descriptors analyzed mentioned those features specifically. In a similar vein, a study of trends in writing instruction across Canadian universities revealed that many universities offered instruction and assessment focused on written communication within one or two composition courses placed early in the program; subsequent courses in the disciplines were taught by disciplinary faculty untrained in composition pedagogy (Reave, 2019).

Additionally, Chenneville and Gay (2021) documented challenges and lessons learned in their attempts to implement written communication as a core competency in a psychology program. They observed that disciplinary faculty largely lacked the preparedness, bandwidth and organizing framework needed to provide writing instruction for their students. Arputhamalar and Kannan (2017) recommended that disciplinary faculty administrators increase compensation for faculty members committing to provide regular detailed feedback on grammar. These points suggested that while coordinated WAC efforts to support writing development across the curriculum are a promising remedy, they may be challenging to execute given the vast array of stakeholders that would need to prioritize the work.

Beyond traditional WAC approaches such as embedding writing instruction and assessment across the curriculum, new approaches are emerging and being assessed to help improve student writing beyond first year composition. They include new technologies (Law & Baer, 2020; Ober, 2021), peer collaboration and support (Dansereau et al. 2020; Ober, 2021; Peltola, 2018), and assessments tied to professional skills databases (Oliveri & McCulla, 2019). Related to the earlier discussion regarding flexibility as both a generic and a writing-specific skill, Fulmer et al. (2021) confirmed the effectiveness of a writing tailoring exercise called “Communication Roulette” in which students enrolled in accounting classes shifted common audiences and writing formats to practice adapting messages to a variety of discipline-specific writing situations. Audiences ranged from clients to CEOs to a young child. Writing formats included Twitter or social media posts, business emails, and executive summaries. The study participant group was comprised of 150 undergraduate and graduate students, largely Business majors and English speakers, at a mid-size private university in the southeast (Fulmer et al., 2021). The researchers indicated a special interest in helping accounting students develop writing flexibility and confidence because accounting students were shown in the literature to struggle with communication anxiety more commonly than other student groups. Likert scale surveys were employed to determine whether students felt the activity helped them to improve their communication abilities across contexts, and whether they felt it increased their confidence. Material proficiency was assessed as well in pre- and post-assessments. The results suggested strongly that this

learning intervention improved proficiency, increased confidence, and increased student perceptions that they were able to communicate flexibly. Furthermore, this particular intervention was chosen for an award at the institution by an interdisciplinary group of faculty (Fulmer et al., 2021, p. 240). Although the value of writing practice to increase content proficiency is not a focus of this study, there is an area of scholarship dedicated to this idea, called Writing to Learn. Certainly, the application of writing practice as an instructional tool to increase disciplinary content proficiency is worth consideration for its fit with andragogy across the curriculum.

Student Perspectives on Their Writing Ability

Several recent studies documented student perspectives on their own writing abilities. In that research, a common theme was that college students tended to overestimate their writing abilities in comparison with actual writing performance assessments (Arputhamalar & Kannan, 2017; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; Wilson et al., 2018). Arputhamalar and Kannan (2017) studied business students' attitudes toward their own writing ability compared with how they were scored on an assigned business letter and demonstrated that while over half of the students they interviewed believed their business letter writing skills to be good, just 20% of those students were assessed in a "good" category on their business letter writing. Some studies demonstrated that students lacked awareness of the importance of writing. For example, Schartel Dunn and Lane (2019) found that supervisors valued accuracy in writing more highly than interns perceived it to be relative to other professional skills. The same study indicated

supervisor opinions that interns were not prepared to produce accurate and effective writing. Another instance of recent graduates underestimating the importance of written communication over other aspects of workforce preparation can be found in Canton et al. (2018), a case study that sought to discover reasons for the lack of success of a writing skills short course. While the students' written work was assessed to be missing key competencies such as contextual awareness and accuracy, the students themselves were more focused on preparing to participate in professional communities of practice than they were interested in putting effort into gaining writing skills. These findings regarding lack of student awareness about the importance of written communication preparedness are particularly concerning considering the assertion from hiring managers in Hastings et al. (2020) that a pattern of perceived errors in written communications would disqualify an applicant from the hiring pool.

Students' inflated perception of their own writing ability does not mean that they enjoy the work of writing. In a study about college students' attitudes about writing, Chai et al. (2021) revealed that while the majority felt they had average or above average writing skills, negative attitudes about writing, negative stories about how teachers of the past approached writing instruction, and a lack of understanding about the importance of writing were common. Most of the participants in this study were preservice teachers. Chai et al. posited that educators who do not like to write in many cases and find the task to be laborious may not have the confidence and interest in supporting important higher order aspects of writing development (ex. critical expression, content development, voice,

and organization) in their students' writing. This idea was also present in Arputhamalar and Kannan (2017), who noted that while formative feedback on grammar inconsistencies was effective over time, due to the time-intensive nature of line-by-line feedback and the likelihood that students will not correct all the inconsistencies, faculty were likely to avoid this aspect of grading. Despite the potential for faculty to avoid prioritizing feedback on grammar and mechanics, faculty shared similar opinions to hiring managers regarding the need for improvement in student writing. Lichtinger (2018) surveyed college lecturers of a third-year course, who indicated that the students' writing skill levels were not up to expectations, although most of the same students had a high opinion of their own writing skills. Canton et al. (2019) demonstrated that student papers lacked evidence of critical written communication skills such as accuracy and context awareness. Seemingly misaligned with these findings is MacDermott and Ortiz's (2017) contribution to the literature that HEI administrators were confident that their institutions adequately prepared students for the workforce.

Responsibility for Writing Training

While at one time soft skills training, including training on written communication, was regularly available in workforce settings, MacDermott and Ortiz (2017) observed that the 2008 recession contributed to a decrease in employee training. More commonly today, employers expect graduates to come into entry-level roles equipped with effective writing skills and rarely prioritize training around written communication (Clokier & Fourie, 2016). There is evidence that soft skills training is

effective for employee learning and development. Ibrahim et al. (2017) conducted a study to learn about the relationship between on-the-job soft skills training and employee performance. The results of the study supported the idea that employees who acquired soft skills as part of a training program showed improved work performance (p. 400). Given this positive correlation, one might expect employers to offer more soft skill training, not less. In fact, the decrease in training may be more related to its impact on business. According to Malik et al. (2019), skill gap training was found not to contribute to profitability, and in fact such trainings were shown to potentially eat into profits. These findings add important context to employers' increasing pressures on HEI administrators to produce graduates who can demonstrate essential soft skills. In the place of past employer-based skills training, some organizations expect employees seeking advancement to upskill outside of work hours and without the support of organizational resources. Increased staffing challenges because of the pandemic has influenced other well-known organizations to partner with entities such as Guild Education that vet and facilitate human resources benefits partnerships with HEIs offering online degree programs. These organizations then provide educational funding as part of available employer benefits (Woodward, 2021). In doing so, these employers are locating the responsibility for skills development once again with HEIs.

Another issue related to pressures on HEI administrators to gear curricula ever more increasingly for skills gap mitigation and workforce readiness is that for regional HEIs, these efforts center regional economies rather than student aspirations and plans

that may not include work within the region where the school is located. Morris et al. (2020) studied the impacts of HEI efforts to close skill gaps on the economy of the region where the institution was located. They found that efforts across higher education to support upskilling tended to benefit stronger regional economies but miss benefiting regions that were already lagging. The resulting discussion and recommendations included proposed policy interventions that would result in HEIs catering to the skill needs in specific regions with lagging economies. This, along with the previous studies reviewed on this topic suggest that the workforce may seek to dictate policy towards ever-more-specific industry needs. This approach contrasts with a HEI policy that would center graduate flexibility and transferability of top in-demand skills in the global economy. Moore and Morton (2017) strongly questioned whether it was realistic for industry leaders to expect that undergraduate institutions will be able to teach to every industry specification for business or professional writing. They instead advocated for a written communication andragogy that forefronted issues of flexibility and learning transfer.

Like the dissonance existing between administrator-reported high confidence in students' workforce preparedness and disciplinary faculty's deprioritization of writing support, a dissonance exists between recently graduated new hires' experiences related to formal professional training and the perspectives on the same topic shared by human resources managers. Succi and Wieandt (2019) conducted an exploratory survey of how hiring managers and recently graduated new hires understood on-the-job-training and

assessment of soft skills. They found that while HR managers indicated that their organization offered formal training and performance appraisal sessions, the majority of recently graduated new hires surveyed did not confirm that they received these benefits. This may indicate a lack of clarity regarding how organizations promote their soft skills training resources.

Linguistic Background Differences

In 1974, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) released a position paper entitled *Students' Right to Their Own Language*. The position taken by this authoritative source on English usage in educational settings was to end a hyperfocus on correcting dialect usage that did not align to Standard American English (SAE) and reallocate focus to the quality of critical expression within the writing (CCCC, n.d.). The statement interpreted linguistic variance as a strength in communication and affirmed students' usage of their home dialects in classroom speech. On the topic of employability, the paper called out the historical influence of English teachers on "the narrow attitudes of today's employers" and called for educators at that time to take part in a movement away from grammar focus and towards focus on matching skills to employment opportunities (p. 23). Additionally, the paper suggested that the likely effect of students learning in their classrooms that certain dialects were inherently "incorrect" was that when they later became employers, they would sustain the same prejudices around spoken and written English (p. 23). The question is whether this cause-and-effect relationship persists today.

Employers indicated in an open response survey on communication skill gaps that the accurate use of “proper English” was among the skills lacking in new hires that could negatively impact a company’s success (Ortiz et al., 2016). As recently as 2020, “correct grammar” was shown to be an indicator of an applicant’s hiring potential: for reviewers assessing a cover letter, perceived errors in grammar usage were reason enough to make negative determinations about a candidate’s character and professionalism (Hastings et al., 2020; Ieske-Rechek, et al., 2019). The CCCC position paper, “Students’ Right to Their Own Language” will be 50 years old in 2024. Researchers documented that English teachers were interpreting African American Language in academic papers and speech as incorrect and improper in 2012 and were also correcting students on grammar in front of the class with the goal of helping Black students avoid future job discrimination and achieve success in the world (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 23). While students regularly become skilled with adjusting their language practices effectively to avoid linguistic discrimination, linguistic racism in the classroom has emotional and developmental impacts on Black language speaking students who move through graduation and into professional settings with internalized messages about the inferiority of their home dialect that result in fear, anxiety, and hypercorrection (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 26). This is just one example of many in linguistic scholarship where minoritized students’ accurate use of their own dialects were interpreted as errors in a dominant dialect usage. Limerick (2019) described a similar phenomenon related to indigenous linguistic forms. Flores and Rosa (2015) demonstrated the ways that language may be interpreted differently based on

who is speaking and who is listening, noting that "even when Standard English learners use forms that seem to correspond to Standard English, they can still be construed as using nonstandard forms from the perspectives of the white listening subject" (p. 166). Flores and Rosa provide the example of Alim's (2007) study at a predominantly African American high school in California in which teacher interviews revealed differences in perception between how white students were seen while engaging in non-normative linguistic practices compared with how African American students engaging in the same non-normative practices were seen. One teacher shared that they had prioritized getting students to eliminate vernacular English, however the teacher then incorrectly gave Standard English phrases "he was" and "she was" as examples of errors (p. 165). Flores and Rosa concluded that "while phrases...might sound like Standard English when uttered by a privileged white student...they are construed as nonstandard practices that should be fixed when uttered by African American students" (p. 165-166). In short, societal norms around language as they relate to minoritized populations of students have not reached a state of equity.

A different perspective on linguistic diversity can be observed in recent pedagogical approaches to teaching English to non-native speakers. Schaefer and Warhol (2019) discussed the value of teaching English language learners about the variety of dialects that exist within the language for improving their competence in communication in a range of contexts beyond those encountered within the classroom, where SAE is presented as a monolith. Additionally, the researchers pointed out that doing so opened

discussions about the relationship between language and identity and linguistic discrimination. This approach demonstrates a move beyond the discriminatory idea that there is one “proper English” towards a more realistic perspective. Language is always in a process of evolution as speakers endeavor to use language to meet evolving social demands. Linguistic variations naturally evolve within communities of speakers, and those variations exist on a surface level that generally does not impact the meaning or clarity of what is being communicated. Further, those variations carry with them aspects of culture that linguists have long understood deserve to be honored rather than denigrated (CCCC, n.d.; Shapiro, 2022).

The College Composition and Rhetoric community continues to convene the CCCC conference annually, albeit remotely over the last couple of years due to the pandemic. In March of 2019, Asao Inoue gave the keynote presentation to a majority white audience, urgently problematizing the persistence of writing pedagogies that sought to teach SAE as the only correct language system for academic and professional communication. He stated, “you actively promote White language supremacy, which is the handmaiden to White bias in the world, the kind that kills Black men on the streets by the hands of the police through profiling and good ol’ fashion prejudice” (p. 359). The murder of George Floyd in 2020 deepened a national reckoning with the real impacts of institutional racism and saw more teachers of writing across races and cultures seeking ways to provide education in SAE to support the social mobility of students while also opening the classroom to more diverse means of expression. With this change,

proponents of linguistic diversity advocated discussion around the communication strengths evident in students who have access to multiple systems of language. At the center of these discussions is the imperative to help students build their own awareness, agency and rhetorical flexibility so that they are empowered to make their own choices regarding language use (Gallager, 2020; Horner & Tetrault, 2017; Shapiro, 2022).

Generational Differences in Attitudes About Writing

Generational differences influence written language styles, as well as one's perception of written communication quality. For example, the written communication of digital natives is often influenced by language habits developed within virtual social spaces. Hungarian researchers Ivanović et al. (2020) described language conventions such as the use of spoken language phrasing and emoticons developed by younger generations through regular communication in social media contexts as contributing to the degradation of the language when applied in contexts where more traditional written language forms are considered conventional. Moore and Morton (2017) featured several examples of employers who considered social media conventions that were appearing in their younger new hires' writing as a sign that proper English was going by the wayside, and with it, appropriate care and attention to craft. Parrella et al. (2021) provided a counternarrative to this belief in their study about the relationship between college students' use of digital media and their own perceptions regarding their formal writing abilities. The researchers found that as time on social media increased, so did students' awareness of rhetorical and process differences between social media writing and writing

for professional publications. This ran counter to their expected result, that increased experience with informal writing would “cause informalities to intersect with professional writing” (p. 10). It is challenging to square these conflicting reports, though the findings discussed earlier in this review that students may overestimate their abilities related to writing may have some bearing on this result. Students may also be unaware of what aspects of their own language usage applied in professional writing are perceived as “informal” by their managers. Furthermore, they may consider language usage of a less formal timbre, such as language reflecting cadences more common to spoken English, to be more accessible, authentic, and “real”. In this sense, one could understand how the use of spoken language in writing may, to younger generations, reflect the ideal of “clarity” in a different way than “clarity” may be understood by those from older generations that were not communicating as regularly through cell phones, computers, and other digital devices. This should not be surprising, given the phenomenon asserted by Moss (2018) that individuals in the workplace across generations ascribed much different meanings and characteristics to critical workplace concepts such as respect, accountability, loyalty, and coaching, depending on generational membership (pp. 34-37).

The impact of rapid technology change on communication is a critical element to this discussion as well. Employers decry the appearance of social media’s influence on workplace written communication regardless of the reality that business communication skills are evolving and will continue to evolve under the influence of ever more present communication technologies (Schartel Dunn & Lane, 2019). As a result of the global

pandemic, workers rapidly increased use of applications such as Zoom, Slack, and Microsoft Teams as they were relied upon to maintain collaboration amidst social distancing regulations. Many, if not all, of these applications have built in emoticons and other features carried through from their social media predecessor, the now defunct AOL Instant Messenger. Notably, this communication technology was a ubiquitous daily communication tool for campus and hometown social connections when many millennials were attending college. Millennials are the largest generation within the workforce (Smith & Garriety, 2020). As millennial representation within professional settings expands, their native communication habits will continue to influence the discourse communities in which they will work.

Generational markers in written communication can hold clues to identity, which can in turn introduce distrust or uncertainty by receivers of a different generation. Downs (2019) found that individuals across generations were more likely to believe that members of other generations held negative stereotypes about their communication and work styles than they were to believe negative stereotypes about members of generations not their own. In contrast, Moss (2018) indicated that it was common for baby boomers to voice frustration that millennials, as a younger generation, exhibited some behaviors such as texting during a presentation, that they interpreted as disrespectful, and for Generation Xers to become annoyed when millennials requested guidance and support, both due to differing interpretations of values between the generations. Further support for the idea that generational stereotypes are at work in the workplace can be found in

Urick (2020), who posited that the sudden pandemic-related shift to remote work could exacerbate problems related to negative generational stereotypes, leading to decreased productivity and work satisfaction for generationally diverse teams. One area of stereotyping was related to older generations negative stereotypes about the younger generation's perceived overuse of technology. Moore and Krause (2021) supported the idea that negative generational stereotyping impacted behaviors in professional settings; they indicated that employees of certain generational groupings negatively stereotyped individuals of other generations' work attitudes, regardless of findings that across all the generational groups surveyed there was little difference in attitudes about work.

Whether an individual reading a written communication forms negative perceptions of a writer based on generational markers, or experiences uncertainty regarding how the individual on the other side of the communication may view them based on generational language markers, these differences mediate the reader's perception. Incidentally, flexibility has been named as a key skill and approach for managers hoping to develop collaborative intergenerational teams (Smith & Garriety, 2020). Flexibility is a generic workforce readiness skill and a skill critical to contextual awareness in written communication that was noted earlier in the discussion of the skills gap to be undertreated in college curricula (Andrade & Ziegner, 2021). In the context of this study, the role of flexibility is emerging as a significant behavioral marker.

The Role of Advisory Boards in Online Higher Education

Colleges and universities assemble advisory boards for many different purposes, from sourcing internal feedback from students and faculty (Hill et al., 2019; Springer et al., 2018) to supporting public relations and fundraising efforts (Mello, 2019). Industry advisory boards are a specific type of resource convened by administrators in higher education for the purpose of gathering field-based knowledge that can inform improvements to program outcomes and content to better meet employer needs and expectations and enhance graduate employability (Mello, 2019). Industry advisory boards may also be assembled to help support educational outcomes in specific skills. For example, Kim et. al (2020) detailed the efforts within Purdue University's engineering department to respond to high-profile ethical lapses, such as those at Volkswagen related to fabricating emissions data, by assembling an advisory board of industry experts to help inform curriculum enhancements to better support graduates' competence in addressing ethical issues. Industry advisory boards, such as those that are the source of participants for this study, engage a blend of alumni and employers representing the various programs within the academic department, as such individuals are uniquely equipped to advise on the important knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for graduates entering the professional areas they represent (Mello, 2019). Given the broad professional importance of written communication skills, managers serving on industry advisory boards across academic disciplines (ex. STEM, nursing and health professions, business, liberal arts,

counseling, and social sciences) would be most likely to provide a broad sampling of feedback that has potential to be generalizable across career fields.

Summary and Conclusions

A review of the literature has demonstrated that employers commonly find graduate written communication skills to be lacking, though they have only increased in demand in the pandemic labor market. Though colleges and universities are regarded by industry as the place that students are to be prepared with this skill set, HEI administrators do not always recognize that students are not receiving the kind of training that leads to employer perceptions that they are adequately prepared. Those administrators who do recognize the need for infusing writing training into program pathways struggle with an assortment of barriers including faculty lack of awareness or resistance, and student disinterest. Students and graduates regularly overestimate their writing skills and underrate the importance of writing skills in comparison to their employers' ratings. Committed administrators carry on nevertheless, testing new approaches and interventions even while employer research studies continue to surface a lack of clarity around which writing skills to prioritize. The challenge to create disciplinary curricula that prepare students for effective writing on the job is further complicated by research findings that judgements about written communication are not subjective. This review has provided examples of two identity features that mediate how language is assessed: generational and racial identity. Finally, there is the complexity to grapple with that language itself is not static. How it is used, and what is considered

acceptable usage, swiftly evolves within communities and over time. The proliferation of communication technology has only accelerated this evolution. This skill set around writing is critical for graduates' employability and professional success and yet so layered and steeped in issues of equity and social justice, that it is imperative for administrators to understand better how to prepare students with skills, but also behaviors and dispositions, that will give them the agency to produce writing that can be *perceived* as "effective", while taking a real responsibility to eliminate the teaching of false and harmful ideas about language and identity. Now that several key perspectives have been identified on the topic of the written communication skills gap, and the complexities related to writing assessment have been demonstrated, the chapter that follows will describe details about how this study has been designed.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate employers' perspectives on the written communication skills gap that hinders college graduates from being successful in their professional practice. By exploring understudied aspects of writing practice and process within the professional discourse communities of the participants, I sought to bridge the gap between composition and rhetoric scholarship and employer studies about the writing skills gap. Researchers who study writing pedagogy prioritize teaching that helps developing writers adapt effectively to new writing situations (Warren & Otto, 2018; Yancey et al. 2018, Yancey et al., 2019). Employer studies have not focused as of yet on behaviors and dispositions; however this employer research study seeks this information specifically from managers. In this chapter, I describe the research setting, explain the design and rationale for the research, detail my role in the research, and provide information about the methodology for the study.

Research Design and Rationale

The research question at the center of this basic qualitative study was, how do employers describe the written communication skills gap that hinders college graduates from being successful in their professional practice? Employer research studies demonstrate that good written communication is in demand among new hires , however employers consistently describe good written communication as one of the skills that are least present in recently graduated new hires (AAC&U, 2018; Kleckner & Butz, 2021; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). The phenomenon of discourse communities defined by

Swales (1990) provided a useful conceptual lens to explore the problem, because employers are members of a discourse community, and, according to Swales, discourse communities often create their own tacit tests of rules and conventions around written communication that are not always explained to newcomers.

The research design selected for this study was basic qualitative research, which involves the collection and analysis of data shared by participants in an individual interview or focus group (Keen, 2018). For this study, I made the choice to conduct interviews instead of focus groups. Ravich and Carl (2021) indicated that focus groups can generate groupthink (p. 150). This could negatively impact the data collection process if interviewees are influenced by the data collection format to respond in ways that are less authentic to their own individual experiences. The variance in employers' perceptions of good or effective writing is a key concept in the existing scholarship (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Moore & Morton, 2017). Therefore, avoiding approaches that could inhibit variance in responses supports the validity of the study.

I considered conducting a phenomenological study, which involves following a smaller number of participants over time and exploring a phenomenon in depth (Keen, 2018). However, given the importance of a wide variety of perspectives, I concluded that a study with a relatively larger pool of participants was more appropriate and amenable to capturing variance in participant perspectives; a larger pool of participants would involve participants from multiple professional disciplines and facilitate data saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These factors supported a basic qualitative research design that featured

qualitative interviews and coding to determine significant themes related to beneficial prewriting behaviors that support effective writing on the job. In addition to determining the best fit for research design, I also attended to my role as the researcher to allow me to operate throughout the study with reflexivity in relation to my positionality and potential biases.

Role of the Researcher

I have been working in online higher education since 2008, starting as an academic advisor, spending time as an online student activities coordinator, a curriculum designer, and academic dean responsible for our online composition courses. In the past few years, the combination of my experience in curriculum design and in professional composition and rhetoric academic communities has led me to take up increased WAC efforts. The online division of the college where I work serves a diverse population of students, many of whom are first generation and from racially minoritized populations. My masters' degree in high school English education has served me well in this most recent work, as open-enrollment online higher education students' language needs and backgrounds share some similarities with those of high school students.

The employers whom I interviewed do not have a direct professional relationship with me, though they are affiliated with the university. The university has advisory boards for each of its academic fields, including business, nursing and health professions, STEM, social sciences, and liberal arts. The boards meet biannually, and the purpose of the meetings is generally for the academic deans to source feedback about trends and

desired skills in professional settings, with a goal of using this information to help inform course and curriculum development. Because I work within the liberal arts academic team, I have attended and participated in discussions with the employers on the liberal arts advisory board.

Researcher bias can threaten the internal validity of a study; therefore, I took care to be aware of my own biases and how they could affect how I interpreted the findings (see Burkholder et al., 2022). As a member of the composition and rhetoric field, I am aware of research published regarding teaching for transfer of writing concepts across the curriculum. These strategies tend to emphasize helping students develop strategies to help them attain flexibility with their writing (Warren & Otto, 2018; Yancey et al. 2018, Yancey et al., 2019). Although I was interested to discover whether flexibility was evident in employers' descriptions, I strove to avoid asking questions in a way that was leading in that direction. I also remained open to ideas or constructs emerging in the data that were unrelated to flexibility. Rubin and Rubin (2012) and Yob and Brewer (n.d.) provided tools for preparing interview questions that support validity. For example, Rubin and Rubin described an interview question type called a "tour question" that prompts an interviewee to describe the phenomena in their own words and walk a researcher through the experience (p. 116). This approach helped to mitigate bias by allowing each interviewee to discuss their experience about the behaviors related to good writing, without being asked about flexibility directly. I applied other mitigating factors to avoid researcher bias as well. I shared my coding notes with my chair throughout the

research gathering and analysis process. I also submitted my field notes to my chair and committee member to allow for review of potential biases that I demonstrated without my awareness (Saldaña, 2016). Finally, at each stage of the research I checked for reliability and validity by using an iterative approach. This supported the alignment of the components of the research and allowed me to verify any emerging ideas across the data sample (Morse et al., 2002). These actions and mindsets all helped to fulfill my commitment to mitigate the impact of researcher bias on my study results. Another strategy I used to support the quality of my research was to conduct the research using strategies tested and generally accepted within the tradition of qualitative methodology.

Methodology

The methodology was consistent with a basic qualitative research study. The underlying philosophy within qualitative research is social constructivism. Using this perspective, I sought meaning of the phenomena from the study participants, via their constructed knowledge (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Use of a basic qualitative design enabled me to gather information about writing behaviors that may support effective written communication for recently graduated new hires. I selected qualitative research over a quantitative design for this study because I planned to develop this research within the context of existing quantitative data in the literature related to the existence of the phenomenon. Several recent studies have demonstrated the importance of written communication as an employability skill (AAC&U, 2018, Baird & Parayitam, 2019; Clokie & Fourie, 2016), and the lack of preparedness of recently graduated new -hires is

well documented (AAC&U, 2018; Kleckner & Butz, 2021; MacDermitt & Ortiz, 2017), but researchers have called for further study to better understand how the skills gap is perceived by employers (Coffelt et al., 2019; Schartel et al., 2019; Moore & Morton, 2017). Qualitative research methods support exploration and further learning about a topic (Keen, 2018).

In this qualitative research, I was the primary instrument for data gathering. Following the advice of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), I used an inductive process of data gathering and drawing conclusions from that data. The effect was that all conclusions about the meaning of the phenomena depended chiefly on the responses from the study participants. In the role of researcher, my influence was contained to the necessary human aspects of hand-coding and analysis, such as how the responses were organized into themes. I acknowledge that bias may still have been possible. While completing the final chapters of the study, I worked to align the analysis and discussion to the literature review and conceptual framework. These approaches helped to maintain the centrality of the participants' responses and constructed knowledge. I took care to select participants in alignment with standards within qualitative research as well.

Participant Selection

This section addresses population and sampling in greater detail. There are many issues that could complicate a researcher's approach to studying the written communication skills gap. Swales (1990), in his six characteristics of a discourse community, implied that conventions can vary greatly across discourse communities and

employers may not be aware of hidden conventions within their professional writing contexts. This could mean that a writer's awareness of these varying conditions and what they demand in terms of writing process and practice is a critical element of what allows a writer to generate what is perceived to be good writing across varying contexts.

Researchers have also demonstrated that recently graduated new hires are not likely to deliver assessments of their own writing that will be a reliable indicator of how an employer might assess their writing (Arputhamalar & Kannan, 2017; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; Wilson et al., 2018). A viable option was to investigate how employers described their employees' behaviors related to generating professional writing products. The employees of interest were those whom the employers considered to have come to the role with the needed writing skills. I invited these individuals to participate in the study.

In this study, I applied purposive sampling to seek participants who could supply the richest information in relation to the research question based on their experience (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). By selecting employers from the variety of fields within our university advisory boards, the goal was to gather a wide range of experiences and seek what is common across those experiences. The concept and intent of "maximum variation sampling" is to "capture the core experiences and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon" (Patton, 2015, as cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 98). Given the implications of the literature review and conceptual framework, the most useful information regarding written communication behaviors would be sourced from

employers who had assigned writing products to recently graduated new hires, and who had both positive and negative experiences with employee writing. I did not wish to limit the participants to only those who had worked with individuals who had graduated from the institution where I work, because I intended for the results to be relevant to any administrator seeking insight into this phenomenon.

Participant selection followed a defined set of requirements and processes. Participants were employers who had worked with a recently graduated employee. I confirmed that participants met the criteria by including the criteria in email communications and asking for potential participants to confirm that they met the criteria. When choosing a number of participants, researchers must analyze whether the data has reached a point of saturation or redundancy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 101). The sample size for this study was 10 participants. At the time of the study, there were five advisory boards covering a range of professional areas at my institution. These areas include nursing and health professions, STEM, business, social sciences, and the liberal arts. I hoped to select two participants from each advisory group to draw from a depth and breadth of experience. Hennink and Kaiser (2022) described several ways to determine saturation, including the stopping criterion approach, which I employed for this study. This was completed as Hennink and Kaiser recommended, by reviewing the first six interviews to identify new codes and stopping after there were no new codes in subsequent interviews.

I reached out to the executive directors of each of the academic verticals to have them connect me with participants based on the criteria shared. I was able to locate five participants through this strategy. As I was unable to attain enough participants this way, I submitted a modification request through my institution's institutional review board (IRB) to work with our employer relations team as well. Once this modification request was approved by my institution's IRB, I attained five more participants through these means. IRB information, including the modification request, is associated with the IRB number from my institution: IRB-FY2022-84. I contacted the potential participants via email with some basic information about the study and the participation criteria. I had the participants confirm that they met the criteria noted as well. Use of these strategies gave me confidence that I had the appropriate number and type of participants for an effective study. An additional area that I needed to attend to was instrumentation for the research.

Instrumentation

The research question—How do employers describe the written communication skills gap that hinders college graduates from being successful in their professional practice?—was exploratory, and therefore best answered using qualitative methods. Semistructured interviews were sufficient to explore this question because they allow the researcher to engage in a guided conversation with individual participants (Crawford, 2020). According to Hennink and Kaiser (2022), scholars using similar methods reach saturation at around 12-13. Using the stopping criterion, I was satisfied that I had reached saturation at 10 participants.

I developed my own interview protocol, using guidance from Rubin and Rubin (2012) and Yob and Brewer (n.d.). The interview protocol is included in Appendix 1. I kept a journal for field notes while I conducted the interviews to document my responses and observations. The semi-structured interview format enabled me to use the interview questions I developed in a flexible way (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This flexibility is an important way for the researcher and interviewer to shape the conversation as it unfolds. I stayed engaged in reflexivity during the interview process, as personal attributes of a researcher will impact how participants share and how they feel about the topic they are discussing (Pezalla et al., 2012). For example, my continuing professional development in the composition and rhetoric discipline means that I am more informed of recent advances in the field, so it was important for me to be aware of the potential discomfort that sharing information from that area of study could have on participants without that training. As a means of recording the interviews, I used Microsoft Teams, which provides captioning and transcription. I secured the information shared in interviews by keeping the transcript documents and notes encrypted and password protected. Audio records are only accessible via passcode. I will retain the data materials in a confidential, secure manner for 3 years beyond CAO approval. I deferred to the 3-year standard provided by the IRB at my institution managing the study oversight (Walden University, 2022).

For researcher-developed instruments, content validity must be established. According to Brod et al. (2009), content validity refers to the extent to which the information collected for the study is as representative as possible. The interview guide

for the current research was new, and the goal of the interviews was, as noted by Brod et al. (2009), “to generate new information regarding a topic of interest based on previously identified possibilities, as well as newly provided information...” (p. 1268). To assure content validity, I followed the recommendations by Brod et al., to begin with a broad question, discuss themes as they are posed by the participant, and save questions about concepts I have noted as potentially important after the other content is covered. I then analyzed whether the concepts raised at the end of the interview were truly relevant to the participant group. When research is conducted this way, it enhances validity (Brod et al., 2009). These practices supported appropriate instrumentation for the study.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

This section describes the recruiting procedures that was employed, and efforts that I made to support the validity of the data collection process. The recruitment process followed standards meant to undergird the quality of the study results. I spoke with the executive directors of each of the academic verticals and my colleagues in the employer partner team and asked them to connect me with participants based on the criteria shared. I then contacted the potential participants with some basic information about the study via email and requested their participation. I had them confirm that they met the criteria noted. These strategies helped me to assure I had the appropriate number and type of participants for an effective study. Participants were provided informed consent through the use of the resources provided by Walden University (Walden University, 2021). I

shared this information via email and covered it in summary at the start of each interview along with overview information about the study.

I used virtual meetings as a space to conduct interviews. The interview was one 45–60-minute session. During interviews, I covered the prompts established in my interview guide. The virtual meetings took place in Microsoft Teams, an application that has a transcription feature. Following the interview, I emailed the participant thanking them for their participation and providing a password protected copy of the transcript for member checking. I will further describe member checking and my approach to this validation strategy in the section on trustworthiness.

Data Analysis Plan

This section is dedicated to addressing the data analysis plan for processing and making meaning from the interview transcripts. After I completed the interview phase, I conducted three rounds of coding. Descriptive coding was completed first, a process that involved labeling the literal content of the transcripts as they related to the research question (Saldaña, 2016). This is also referred to as “structural coding” (Laureate Education, 2016). I then completed a second round of coding for conceptual codes. During this second around of coding, I sought patterns and any emerging concepts (Saldaña, 2016). To identify themes, I looked for, as noted by Marcus, “commonalities among [the] different codes” (Laureate Education, 2016, 1:30). This was an inductive process involving reflection and critical thinking, relating the information shared by participants and the most critical aspects of the research question and conceptual

framework. A third round of conceptual coding enabled me to group some like sub-themes together to better clarify and organize themes for the analysis.

While coding, discrepant data may emerge. Outlier responses that do not fit neatly into a theme must be acknowledged and analyzed as part of the data discussion (Burkholder et al., 2022). I did experience some data elements that at first did not seem to fit into a theme, however I reorganized my themes in that category and was able to see how they could authentically be incorporated. I discuss this process in further detail in the results section. These practices helped to support the trustworthiness of the research. There are several other aspects of trustworthiness that will be explored in the following section.

Trustworthiness

To generate a study that is trustworthy, qualitative researchers must address “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Shenton, 2004, p. 63-75). Researchers have an interest in presenting research that can be considered sound by the academic community. Attending to these four areas where qualitative research has often been critiqued can demonstrate that the researcher has addressed known potential threats to the quality of the research (Shenton, 2004). This section will detail efforts to attend to these aspects of trustworthiness in the data analysis process.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the believability of the research (Shenton, 2004). Therefore, credibility requires that a researcher take care to not make decisions that are not

justifiable. One example might be making unfounded stretches in data grouping to suit a coding scheme. I used memos throughout the coding process to provide “reflective commentary” at each stage of the coding (Shenton, 2004, p. 68). This aspect of the coding work helped me to identify connections and patterns not initially evident in the coding process itself and prompted the decision to complete a 3rd round of conceptual coding. It is common for researchers to iterate on their coding process, recoding across coding cycles as the researcher reviews and reflects upon the results of the work (Saldana, 2016). While the researcher must attend to credibility to support the trustworthiness of the study, they must also address transferability and dependability.

Transferability

Shenton (2004) indicated that to allow for readers to understand the transferability of a study, important details must be shared about the context of the study and the methodology. Other researchers reviewing the data analysis sections of the project should be able to understand the key aspects of the study in enough detail that they can determine whether it would be appropriate to apply the information to their context. For this study, I have attended to transferability by discussing the coding process I used. I have also indicated my own thoughts about my positionality, and I have described how I sourced the data for the study.

Dependability

Dependability is like credibility in that it requires the researcher to share important content about the process of the research. In this case, however, the

information is shared for the purpose of helping other researchers replicate the study (Shenton, 2004). Details about data gathering methods, reflections about the effectiveness of the research methods as well as any challenges met during the process are intended to bolster a sense of dependability in the analysis.

Confirmability

Confirmability is more likely to be achieved in research if the researcher is aware and able to address their own biases related to the participants, subject, and data (Shenton, 2004). Throughout the stages of data gathering, coding, and analysis, I took time to acknowledge my feelings about the participants and my reactions to their responses. Written reflection throughout the coding process facilitated the construction of an “audit trail” that describes how constructs were developed (p. 72). No researcher can be entirely impartial, as lived experiences will always influence an individuals’ perspectives. However, researchers should strive to be as objective as possible and utilize ethical research protocols.

Ethical Procedures

Researchers must attend to the ethical responsibilities of conducting research at each stage of the study, including communications about the study, during the interview, and in the treatment of the data after the study is complete. Research participants deserve kind, respectful, and accommodating treatment in all communications before, during, and after the interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I conducted “recruitment, informed consent, and data collection” anonymously (Walden University, 2021). Lambert (2012)

recommended that the researcher should select methods of research that will help them answer their research question, not cause harm to their participants or themselves (p. 110). By focusing on positive and productive writing behaviors, I hoped to support interview experiences that were hopeful and useful learning experiences for myself and for the participants involved in the study. With regards to data security, it is an ethical responsibility of the researcher to keep information confidential (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). In alignment with standard practice, I password-protected the transcript files, replaced participant names in the transcripts with codes. I further protected participants' identities by referring to them by number and using the singular "they" to mask gender, as gender was not an identity criterion that was indicated as relevant within the scholarship described within the literature review.

To support data accuracy and ethical data collection, I engaged in member checking. Member checking refers to the sharing of transcript data with research participants for the purpose of having them confirm its accuracy or provide revision requests. Motulsky (2021) outlined several ethical and moral considerations that must be considered by researchers when engaging in member checking, including negative impacts on participants' self-concept in reviewing their responses and unrealistic demands on participants' time, yet she also expressed that member checking remains a key expectation for rigor in qualitative research. To mitigate negative impacts on my participants, I shared transcripts along with information that made these common areas of

concern transparent, thus providing the respect of awareness while normalizing potential negative feelings and allowing them the right to decline.

Institutional Permissions

The Walden University Office of Research and Doctoral Services website indicates the steps that doctoral students must follow to secure Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to beginning the research portion of a dissertation (Walden University, n.d.). The IRB approval number from my institution for this study is IRB-FY2022-84. I submitted my project to the IRB by completing the required paperwork, beginning with the Description of Data Sources and Partner Sites form. I followed all documentation, revision, and approval needs requested by the IRB to meet the university standards for ethics. After the proposal was approved the IRB conducted a final official ethics review of the proposal. I obtained IRB approval from University A as a partner organization, and followed all standards outlined by University A's IRB as this was the IRB chosen to oversee the research. These steps were completed before I outreached any potential study participants.

Ethical Recruitment

Ethical recruitment refers to the practices that a researcher undertakes to obtain participants for a research study while ensuring respect, privacy, and compliance with IRB standards. Walden University provides guidelines and samples of invitations that help the researcher communicate important information about the study clearly. I generated invitations following the sample and information provided by Walden

University. A critical aspect of ethical recruitment of participants is the researcher's requirement to obtain informed consent. This involves making sure that potential participants are aware of what the research project entails, understand potential risks, and do not feel at all pressured to participate (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). To cover all of the aspects required of the university, I used consent forms provided by Walden University to gain consent from my participants (Walden University, 2021).

Ethical Participant Support

Researchers must always be attuned to supporting the dignity and comfort of research participants. Behaviors that must be avoided by a researcher include applying pressure, deception, or breaking of agreements or promises, including those around the amount of time that the participant will be asked to dedicate to the interview (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). I complied with all codes of ethics within Walden University and University A. Additionally, I followed the recommendations made by Rubin and Rubin (2012) to maintain politeness at all times, provide reminders that the interview was being recorded, indicate in the notes if a comment is intended by a participant to be off the record, and mask any information that could allow a reader to identify a participant in the study.

Summary

In this chapter, I reviewed the research setting, the design, and the rationale for the research, as well as my understanding of my role as the researcher. I have also provided information on the methodology of the study, including how I mitigated ethical

risks related to impact on participants and privacy. Chapter 4 will contain information about how the methodology will be applied in the research process, as well as data analysis, results, and a discussion of significance and areas recommended for future further study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn about employers' perspectives on the written communication skills gap, with a particular focus on effective behaviors that support graduates in being successful writers in their professions. The research question for this study was, How do employers describe the written communication skills gap that hinders college graduates from being successful in their professional practice? In this chapter, I will first describe the study setting and review the data collection procedures. Then, findings from the data analysis will be presented, followed by evidence of trustworthiness. The chapter ends with a summary of key points and a transition to Chapter 5.

Setting

I used two means of recruiting participants for this study. The first was via email to academic advisory boards, and the second was via email to employers connected with the site through the university employer relations team. The original recruitment plan was to reach out to advisory board members; however, I was not able to recruit enough participants through this method and after several weeks it was necessary to submit an IRB modification to broaden the recruitment by partnering with the university's career services team. This change provided enough respondents to reach 10 interviews, which were evenly split between the two recruitment approaches. The interviews took place between October 2022 and early January 2023, a time frame that coincided with the winter holidays and the winding down activities of the calendar year. There were no

significant organizational changes or events that would affect interpretation of the study results. Within my own team, there was a significant personnel change within leadership in mid-January that caused some feelings of upheaval and destabilization. The change occurred after the interviews had been completed and during the coding process.

Although this change was personally impactful, it was not likely to influence my analysis because the subject of the study and the issues surrounding the personnel change are unrelated.

The participant pool was made up of 10 managers of at least one new employee who had graduated in the last 5 years. One of the goals of recruitment was to obtain perspectives across a range of industries. Industries represented by the participants included accounting, advertising, banking, emergency management, entertainment writing, executive coaching, food safety, government, health care, higher education, and not-for-profit.

Data Collection

I conducted semistructured interviews with the 10 study participants. Interviews took place over Microsoft Teams and ran between 45 and 60 minutes. One interview was conducted for each study participant. The data were recorded using the transcription feature in Microsoft teams. The data collection was consistent with the plan presented in Chapter 3. Some of the interviewees chose to dial in rather than use the video feature; however, the transcription feature operated the same in either circumstance. After the data collection process was complete, I began to analyze the data.

Data Analysis

This section is dedicated to describing the process that was used to analyze the interview data. I first completed descriptive coding as described by Saldaña (2016). I organized responses together within Microsoft Excel sheets as they related to the interview protocol questions asked. While I completed this round, I began to make notes on similarities in the codes, as described by Marcus (Laureate Education, 2016). I then completed a second round of coding, described as conceptual coding by Saldana. In this round, I grouped the data into concepts, prioritizing themes that were most relevant to the research question and conceptual framework.

During the data analysis process, I did encounter some possible discrepant data. Discrepant data are described as outlier responses that do not fit neatly into a theme (Burkholder et al., 2022). I had responses within the category of dispositions and habits of effective writers that seemed to speak to managers seeking graduates with their own process or method of drafting. One of these data points came from Participant 2 and two from Participant 5. However, these data points together were not enough on their own to indicate a subtheme. I decided to include those statements under the subtheme of thoroughness because thoroughness can denote engaging consciously in a specific process. Table 1 displays the themes and subthemes that emerged in the data.

Table 1

Themes and Subthemes

Theme	Subtheme
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Description of a good writer	Critical thinking about audience and message Methodical approach Manager teaching Dispositions
Lessons learned	Self-awareness Audience research Key person
Communication technology	Emojis Texting and tweeting
Dispositions and habits of effective writers	Research Thoroughness Confidence Self-awareness and self-regulation

In the following sections, I will further describe the themes and subthemes shown in Table 1.

Descriptions of a Good Writer

Within the first theme, descriptions of a good writer, there were several subthemes that emerged from participants' stories of new hires they considered to be good writers. These included critical thinking about audience and message, methodical approach, manager teaching, and dispositions. Participants 1, 4, and 7 spoke about how critical thinking about audience and message was a behavior demonstrated by effective writers who were new in their roles. Effective writers prioritized how the audience would

understand what they were writing and communicated throughout their writing process to ensure that the message was clear and relatable. This included collaborating with the manager by asking concise follow-up questions to clarify audience needs. The role of critical thinking ran throughout the writing process, leading the writer to make choices throughout the text that would best support their readers' understanding. Participant 7 noted that effective writers are "people that understand connecting the dots is not just what's in the middle of the document, it's what the subject line is, is what you're closing statement is, everything has got to have a little bit of thought behind it." Altogether, the responses paint a picture of a writer who is constantly aware of their role of communicator in relation to the audience, and therefore takes care at each stage allow the reader's needs to guide each phase of the writing process.

Participants 3, 4, and 6 described effective writers as having a methodical approach. Each of the writers described had a sense of agency and commitment to their own kind of writing process and an innate sense of purpose while engaged in the work. Managers described positive and consistent habits they observed the writers engaging in, including completing extensive research, using spell-check, and applying consistent formatting. These consistent behaviors gave managers confidence when they assigned a writing task that a draft shared by the writer would meet their expectations. Participant 6 described a writer who volunteered her written communication skills to support her team in writing new processes. They said, "she is very focused. And like I said, she always wants to be the note taker because she's like, for myself, I like to document what we

talked about.” These writers all displayed agency and self-assuredness in their approaches, though the specific behaviors highlighted by the managers in each of their approaches varied.

Effective writers were engaged in continuous critical thinking about their writing and a consistent and predictable process that managers came to rely on. However, many participants described investing time into teaching the new hires about aspects of the professional context that were not apparent to the new hires at the time the writing task was assigned. Participants 1, 3, 5, and 8 all described the necessity of manager teaching related to field-based conventions and information particular the professional context. They spent time and effort explaining these key elements in order to help their new colleague write effectively in their roles. Without the awareness of these conventions and practice in applying them, new hires were prone to produce writing that could not be considered effective for its purpose, in one case because it was lacking critical information that was only shared in a past committee meeting that the new hire did not attend, or in another, because it made use of language that was conventional in the university context but considered inflammatory by some within an older target audience. The period of learning that these described “good writers” went through with the aid of their managers was common. In fact, many managers described spending significant time mentoring and supporting new hires with their writing, whether they were perceived as good writers or not. Participant 3 noted that all the writers they considered to be effective required development at first. They shared, “the people that are standing out in my mind

are the people who I worked with and who got better and became what I consider good writers.” It was clear that significant training around written communication was happening in the workplaces of several of the participants, though very few said there was a formal written communication training offered through their organization for new hires. Given the amount of time being spent, the quality of the interactions between the new hire and their manager around writing were an important consideration.

The final sub-theme within the theme of effective writers was *dispositions*, in which managers described the effective new hire writers on their teams as *self-starters* and individuals demonstrating *self-awareness*. Effective writers were lauded for jumping into new writing tasks with motivation and confidence in their skills. Participant 5 noted that willingness and motivation to engage in written communication for professional purposes supported advancement in the workplace. They noted, “I can tell you that the people who jump in are people who...want to promote themselves and they realize that if they're the creators of something, they're also the presenters of it and their voice will be heard”. Though they were self-starters, effective writers did not go it alone. Managers described a quality of *self-awareness* that led the new hires to ask questions and convey aspects of the project where they perceived they were missing critical information. Participant 2 described an effective writer they had worked with in another team who sought out examples and templates as she was beginning to write something new. They noted, “if she had any questions, she would come back to you and say ‘can you send me something that sounds like this or looks like this to help me sort it out’. So she knew

when she needed a little extra help.” Taken together, participants’ stories about an effective new hire writer point to one who is comfortable with their own skill sets and processes, but also aware of the need for collaboration with managers or others to fill in gaps in knowledge needed for effective written communications. Throughout the interviews, participants described many and varied aspects of new hire writing that did not meet their expectations, and those who they considered to be effective writers still needed significant support to produce “good writing,” or communications that were effective for their purpose. When managers shared some of their own experiences writing for the first time when they were new in their fields, similar ideas around learning emerged.

Lessons Learned

Within the second theme, *lessons learned*, participants discussed experiences of learning to write in their fields in sub-themes of *self-awareness*, *audience research*, and a *key person*. The concept of self-awareness emerged again in the manager’s personal *lessons learned* about effective writing in their varied fields. Participants shared stories of learning to manage emotions in written communication and developing humility around the writing process and receiving feedback. Participant 8 came to embrace collaboration. They noted, “now I ask other people, sometimes, If I’m going to write a really challenging e-mail that someone else will look at it, to make sure that I’m saying it in an appropriate manner.” The idea that one had all they needed to write, for example, by nature of achieving a college degree, gave way to acknowledgement of occasions within

a writing process in which receptivity and collaboration were essential in order to produce good writing.

In addition to self-awareness, a sub-theme within the *lessons learned* category emerged around the manager's growing awareness of their relationship with a particular audience within their fields, and their need to complete *audience research*, as described by participants 1, 3, 4, 8, and 10. Participants discussed a realization gained through practice that all aspects of effective communication were dependent on consistent research around audience needs, from the choice between bullet points and paragraphs to the topics chosen for communications, choices around voice and style, and selection of sources to consult for research. Effective decisions could only be made through learning about the audience. Participant 4 noted that as an entertainment writer covering a new interest area they were not familiar with, a learning process was necessary. They shared, "well let me tell you I'm not interior decorator, but I learned a great deal working with them and figuring out good sources." In fact, 3 Participants used the exact phrase "trial and error" to describe their learning process as writers in a new professional context, and many others echoed the idea that they learned from experience and "figure it out" along the way.

One of the themes participants spoke most emphatically about was the story of a *key person*. 6 of the 10 participants offered stories of a significant mentor or influencer that helped them significantly in their writing journey. These key people were educators, managers, colleagues, or family members who opened the participants' eyes to aspects of

effective writing practice. Their impact was always significant. Participant 1 said of an educator, “she changed my life when I came in and started in the communications degree and I started writing and doing that. I saw writing from a different perspective . . . Now I’m very intentional in what I write.” Other participants spoke of parents, teachers, engaged managers, and colleagues who fulfilled this role in their development as writers. A key person made an impact for participants who were not yet aware of skills or practices that would support their success with writing, but also helped one manager realize and embrace their positive skill sets around writing. Participant 7 said,

I remember the teacher, this is middle school, like 7th grade. I remember her saying it was the best report she had ever read and she was like ‘you crushed it’ . . .and well, I never knew. And ever since then, I never had an issue with writing and communicating in written form.

Whether managers were lost in navigating a new platform like WordPress or experiencing unintended responses to their tone in text, key people intervened or modeled effective practices to make the invisible visible and usher them into a greater agency in using writing to accomplish their goals.

Communication Technology

The third theme addressed the impact of *communication technology* on employer’s perceptions of new hire writing and included sub-themes of *emojis* and *texting and tweeting*. The first theme in this category addressed varied perceptions around the appropriateness of *emojis* in professional communication. Participants 1, 4, 6, and 11

offered comments on the topic. Participant 1, a baby boomer, noted a generational difference in how individuals approached the use of emojis. They shared, “I was working with someone who was in her 20s and, you know, she could use emojis for most of what she does. That's what she's used to. And I was communicating, I say, I don't think in Twitter, so I'm writing complete sentences and framing and things like that”. Participant 6, a baby boomer, described emojis as antithetical to professionalism in emails, noting that she did not see them in new hire emails. However, Participant 4, a member of Generation X, did observe emojis and abbreviations in emails from prospective new hires, but also acknowledged that they were common in interoffice communications in her workplace as well. They noted a degree of critical thinking was needed around the decision to include them. They shared, “if it's somebody that I've never met or I just met once and it's, obviously, to the CEO, depending on how well you know them, you wouldn't put like an emoji kind of thing or ‘lol’ or something like that”. Participant 10, a millennial, described the use of emojis in professional communication as a marker of politeness and a way to infuse warmth into communications for the purpose of reassuring the receivers of the communication of their positive regard. Within the participant sample perspectives differed regarding the professionalism of emojis, and their value in formal communication, and opinions were higher among members of younger generations.

The second sub-theme in the theme of *communication technology* was the influence of *texting and tweeting* on communication in professional contexts. 6 of the 10

participants offered comments on this topic. Unlike the varying perceptions around the use of emojis, participants were aligned in their preference for professional communication free of textual features common to texting and tweeting. Participant 1, and 2, both members of the baby boomer generation, ascribed the use of textual conventions such as missing punctuation and short messages to a lack of care or interest in putting in the effort to write in more traditional and time-intensive forms. Participants 10 and 4, both members of Generation X, conveyed that textual markers reminiscent of texts and tweets were not appropriate for formal communication and indicated that new hires should know better. Participant 4 noted, “I have had some who sound like they have been writing a tweet within the e-mail, so it's dreadful. It's like, would you really talk to your boss like this?” Participant 7, a millennial, recognized the ease of texting compared to more traditional forms of writing, but still indicated a preference for college graduates to be prepared to adjust their approach for professional contexts. While all the participants who offered comments on this topic indicated that texting and tweeting had an unfavorable influence on new hire writing, there was some variation in attitudes around the value of texting and tweeting, with Participant 7 expressing some positive regard for texting when used in its native context.

Dispositions and Habits of Effective Writers

The final theme that emerged in the data was *dispositions and habits of effective writers*. It included sub-themes of *research, thoroughness, confidence, independence, and self-awareness and self-regulation*. Seven of the 10 participants shared the need for

learners to take time to *research* needs related to a written communication before writing, including conventional presentation tools and information sources. Participant 5 explained, “people don't know about tools like Canva and design ideas in PowerPoint and things like that. You know, they don't research this stuff as much as they should.”

Another area participants said would benefit from research was form, with many noting that conciseness and the use of bullets or paragraph breaks as often-missed conventions; some expressed dissatisfaction with the common experience of receiving a “wall of text” in first drafts or emails from new hires. Tone, style, and word choice decisions also required audience awareness. Participant 3 described a process of training their new hires to connect with an audience before producing writing for them that involved showing them pictures representing the group that would be receiving the communication. There was, throughout the responses, an implied connection between writing that was perceived as ineffective and writers who didn't “know their audience”. Effective writers take time ahead of writing to complete necessary audience research. While early stages of writing process were enhanced by slowing down to first complete the needed research, the value of taking one's time was expressed as an important behavior throughout the writing process in the next sub-theme of *thoroughness*.

The sub-theme of *thoroughness* appeared for the first time in the context of manager's stories of effective writers earlier in this chapter, and again as a recommended behavior to teach in undergraduate curriculum. Participants 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 9 noted the need for writers to engage in thought processes around customization, argumentation,

and proofreading before hitting send. Written communications that didn't meet manager expectations was sometimes ascribed to perceived negative characteristics of younger generations. For example, Participant 2, a baby boomer, noted the need for writers to engage in more critical thought ahead of developing written communications. They indicated, "it's how you organize your thoughts. That's where I find a lot of Gen Zers have a lot of trouble. It's like they do on paper the same thing they do in person...they'll stand in front of you and just babble away." A perceived lack of thoroughness in the writing process gleaned from a lack of clarity or sentences that didn't meet expected grammar or punctuation conventions could ultimately keep prospective new hires from getting the job, as this could cause managers to question the new hire's ability to pay attention to detail in professional writing and other work contexts as well. It was clear that as grateful as managers were when describing new hires that they saw as thorough in their writing process, they were equally dissatisfied with writers who did not appear to embody this trait.

Given the amount of time that managers described training new hires to write effectively, the newcomers' dispositions and attitudes toward their ability to learn featured prominently throughout the interviews. Participants 3, 4, and 5 were seeking new hire writers who showed *confidence* in their ability to develop written communications. There was a sense that writers had been taught the skills necessary for effective writing, but due to nervousness or lack of self-assuredness they were not initially able to access them and trust their own decision-making. Participant 3 indicated

varying reasons for the lack of confidence, from lack of experience with professional settings to limiting beliefs learned over time. They stated,

when I typically work with my older generations in particular, there is a confidence issue there as well, because it may be a project that they've always wanted to do professionally, but they may not have had the confidence to do it prior to this time.

Writers who were confident leaned less on managers for smaller decisions about writing, and instead trusted their own process and knowledge about effective writing to lead their work.

Closely related to *confidence*, The sub-theme of *independence* emerged in this theme as well, as Participants 1, 3, 5, 8, and 9 desired writers who were self-starters who were ready to think critically and learn on their own. Participant 8 said, “this type of student that I'm looking at is a self-starter who is motivated to come in and have some real responsibility and be able to write, present, and communicate and then do. It isn't just, it's not a theoretical paper. Then taking it to that next level because we're all about implementing”. Qualities ascribed to confident writers were passion, discernment, and the ability to be self-taught, but a perfect written communication generated in isolation was only indicated as an expectation in the context of hiring materials such as resumes. In fact, managers commonly described providing feedback and offering time to collaborate on a draft in the context of working with those new hires they perceived to be effective

writers. What was desired, instead, was the writer's ability to figure out as much as they possibly could on their own using their own research skills and discernment.

Finally, in the category of *dispositions and habits of effective writers*, participants 1, 9, and 10 spoke to the need for *self-awareness and self-regulation*; these were places where applicants or new hires got in their own way. Participants spoke of the need for new hires to demonstrate receptiveness to feedback when the instinct may be to go on the defensive, as well as and care with tone in written communications in stressful moments. When emotions such as frustration, anger, or impatience were perceived in emails or office chats sent by new hires, this was viewed unfavorably by participants. Participant 10 described the negative impact of such exchanges in the early days of a new hire's tenure. They related,

if they're already fighting with the technology and they can't communicate that in a kind way...getting frustrated and angry instead of saying 'hey, I'm having some trouble. Could you please help me out?'...It gives you an impression. And we can tell very early on that person isn't going to last in this role.

Participants related that while some new hires came in using conventions and styles representative of their experience with prior writing platforms and communities such as Twitter or Facebook and then adjusted, some participants expressed resistance to learning new approaches. Participant 1 noted, "there were people who weren't interested in learning how to communicate differently: 'this is the way I communicate and that's what it is' and there are some people who are like that and I respect that. But that means that

we're not meant to work together.” Self-awareness and self-regulation were traits that enabled writers to enter, collaborate and learn in new professional settings.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

This section covers the implementation of trustworthiness measures that were described in Chapter 3, as well as any adjustments to those measures. Consideration for the four key areas related to qualitative research trustworthiness described by Shenton (2004) are addressed, supporting the soundness of the study results.

Credibility

According to Shenton (2004), credibility refers to the believability of the research. Throughout the research process I made sure that any decision that I made about coding or structuring the results was justifiable. I made use of memos to reflect upon each stage of the research per Shenton’s (2004) recommendations. I had initially planned to complete 2 rounds of coding, however my reflections prompted me to complete a 3rd round of conceptual coding. I did so with the awareness that recoding and iteration are common in qualitative research (Saldana, 2016). In addition to these practices, I attended to transferability and dependability.

Transferability and Dependability

To address transferability and dependency, I followed Shenton’s (2004) guidance to share important details about the context of the study and the methodology. As I wrote, I considered what information and details would be needed to be included for researchers to understand whether the findings would be applicable to their own context. I it would

be appropriate to apply the information to their context. This mindset prompted me to discuss the coding process that I used, as well as reflections on my positionality and details about the data gathering process applied. To support the potential for the study to be replicated, I followed Shenton's (2004) guidance by including information about the methodology, reflections regarding the effectiveness of the research methods, and documented challenges encountered during the process. It is my belief that sufficient background information is included to support both the transferability and dependability of the study. I made similar provisions for assuring confirmability.

Confirmability

Shenton (2004) noted that researchers must address their own biases to support the confirmability of the research. I attended to confirmability by reflecting upon my own feelings about participants and the views that they shared. The field notes I made during the interviews and coding process supported my intentions of impartiality. While it is not possible to avoid all bias entirely, conscious consideration of potential biases helped me to support an objective approach to the data and analysis.

Summary

As the researcher, my focus for the interviews was to learn about elements of the writing process, including behaviors and dispositions, of recently graduated new hires that the managers I spoke with considered to be effective writers. Participants spoke of effective writers they had managed as engaging in their own methodical writing process that put importance on audience research as the project commenced and used information

from that research and additional input as needed to prioritize the reader in decision-making throughout the project. Managers described investing significant time teaching new hires knowledge and conventions specific to their professional settings to support their success. This was the case for new hires generally, including those that they considered to be effective writers. Key dispositions that supported new hires in effective writing were the ability to self-start and complete as much of a writing project as they could using their own skills and knowledge, and the self-awareness to ask for examples, information, and feedback when appropriate. Further general questioning about dispositions and habits that should be prioritized in writing curriculum reconfirmed themes of the importance of audience research and self-awareness, while also highlighting the desire for new hires to demonstrate confidence in their own abilities and a habit of thoroughness throughout the writing process marked with taking one's time to develop arguments, proofread, and polish before sharing a draft.

Managers' own stories of how they learned to write in their fields brought greater insight to the experience and needs of a professional learning to write in a new professional setting. Dispositions and behaviors praised by managers in their effective new hire writer stories were reminiscent of those that they described learning on the job. A common refrain from managers sharing their stories regarding the attainment of these dispositions and behaviors was that they were learned through trial and error and "figuring it out" over time. Just as participants described the necessity of their own investment of time in teaching new hires how to write effectively for stakeholders within

their professional spheres, they recalled a key person who served as a catalyst in their development. These individuals were credited with helping to change the way they understood their skill sets and their role as writers in relation to an audience. While participants appeared to align on many dispositions and behaviors that supported effective writing, perceptions of the influence of communication technology on professional writing was an area where there was significant divergence.

According to participants, professional written communications produced by applicants and new hires had been significantly influenced by conventions native to social media and communication technologies such as cell phone texting. They described the appearance of emojis, abbreviations, and brief communications resembling extemporaneous speech patterns, but perceptions of the appropriateness and value of these conventions in professional settings varied along generational lines. While all participants who spoke about “text speak” or writing that resembled tweeting spoke unfavorably of seeing such conventions in professional writing, there were variations in perception of the value of emojis for workplace communication. Furthermore, the perceived value of emojis as communication tools for professional purposes increased incrementally from managers of the baby boomer generation who saw no place for them in work contexts to a millennial manager who used them to help convey politeness and warmth in written messages to their colleagues. The discussion around the impact of communication technology provided an example of differing expectations and conventions across professional contexts also signaled misalignment in communication

styles and questions or beliefs within the baby boomer and Generation X populations about whether some younger professionals were interested in or willing to learn new conventions. In summary, the most critical behaviors and dispositions that managers associated with effective writing were critical thinking and research around audience, confident engagement in one's own methodical approach to their writing process, a habit of thoroughness. However, differences in use and perception of conventions associated with newer communication technology threatened to hamper the success of new hires accustomed to using them across communications. In chapter 5 these findings and their implications will be discussed, as well as study limitations and recommendations for further research.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn about employers' perspectives on the written communication skills gap that negatively affects recent graduates' ability to be successful in new professions. The research had a specific focus on behaviors that support recent graduates in writing effectively in new professional settings. The picture of an effective writer that emerged in the interview data was one who proactively engages in their own methodical writing process; prioritizes the audience; reaches out for support when needed; and practices thoroughness throughout the phases of researching, drafting, and preparing to share a draft or hit send on a written communication. The key themes and subthemes identified are noted in Table 1. The influence of conventions native to social media and communication technologies such as texting threaten to trouble new hires when used without a level of discernment about how they may be received by various professional audiences. In the next section, I will review the study findings.

Interpretation of the Findings

In this section, I interpret the study findings in relation to the literature review and conceptual framework. Some of the findings confirmed existing research findings. Other findings were not aligned. One difference related to how managers perceived new hire writers in the literature as opposed to how participants described them. Another difference was noticeable in the discussion of writing training. The studies cited in the literature review indicated that organizations rarely address writing training, whereas study participants related spending significant time and effort supporting their team

members with effective writing. I will outline these differences and additional interpretations of the data in the following sections.

Perceptions of New Hire Writing

I focused on behaviors and dispositions that support the perception of effective writing in this study because there was significant evidence in prior research that an individual's assessment of the quality of a piece of writing is influenced by their generational (Moss, 2018), raciolinguistic (Baker-Bell, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2015), and professional background (Swales, 1990). Researchers have documented the challenge of preparing students to produce effective writing when graduates are likely to encounter a broad range of varying expectations regarding what good writing looks like. Managers who participated in this study reported that new hires commonly displayed timidity and lack of confidence in their writing choices and process. They appreciated new hire writers who demonstrated the dispositions of confidence and self-starting.

The literature review referenced the work of several researchers on college student and new hire perceptions of their own writing. These researchers described the tendency for college students and new hires to overestimate their writing abilities in comparison to their scores on a formal writing assessment (Arputhamalar & Kannan, 2017; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017; Wilson et al., 2018). Researchers also noted new hires' tendencies to underestimate the importance of writing accuracy relative to other professional skills, where supervisors rated writing skills as higher in importance (Schartel Dunn and Lane, 2019). Although the literature review pointed to graduates with

unjustified confidence in writing skills that were ineffective for producing quality writing (Arputhamalar & Kannan, 2017; Hastings et al., 2020), the findings of this study described a different situation: recently graduated new hires who managers believed to have the necessary writing skills to be successful, but who demonstrated timidity and a lack of confidence in their ability to write effectively. Participating managers ascribed perceived errors more commonly to nervousness, excitement, or a lack of thoroughness rather than a lack of knowledge of conventions. Participants did, however, question new hire knowledge of the importance of proofreading and producing writing consistent with their industry or organizational conventions.

This aspect of the findings is consistent with the theme within the literature review of lack of college student and new hire awareness of the importance managers place on effective written communication (Canton et al.; Schartel Dunn, & Lane, 2019). There is evidence in the literature review and within the study that prospective new hires who failed to meet a particular threshold of expected conventions in their hiring materials did not advance into interviews. Participants in this study further indicated that if prospective new hires did advance to a next stage of the process, they may do so with a flagged file noting written communication as a concern that could prove a liability within internal and client communications.

Managers as Writing Teachers

Participant responses in this study confirmed the trend noted in the literature review that formal and compulsory employee training around written communication was

increasingly rare (Clokier & Fourie, 2016; MacDermott and Ortiz, 2017). In the interview data, if training was offered at all, it was in self-service and self-led formats, and in one instance, it occurred only because a manager took the initiative to seek it out for their team. Although research indicates that the expectation from industry is that all training around written communication is to happen in the context of HEIs (Malik et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2020), this study suggests that individual managers take on a significant amount of teaching and mentoring regarding writing to help upskill their new hires, and two of the participants related being mentored in the same way by managers themselves.

Two additional counterpoints to the idea that all learning about writing can take place prior to graduation were demonstrated in this study: Several participating managers remarked upon conventions, audience information, or pieces of historical organizational knowledge that a new hire simply did not have prior access to learn and related their own experience with learning that was gained via a process of trial and error on the job. It is interesting to note that a barrier to effective teaching of writing within HEI settings is faculty reluctance to address writing effectiveness in non-composition courses, sometimes due to their own discomfort with writing and other times due to a lack of prioritization of writing relative to other course competencies (Arputhamalar & Kannan, 2017; Chai et al. 2021; Reave, L. 2019). The participating managers I spoke with were not reluctant to work with new hires on their writing but in some cases were mystified that common conventions such as paragraph formatting and critical expression seemed not to be taught in school anymore.

Impact of Demographic Differences

The literature review included research that focused on the impact of raciolinguistic background (Baker-Bell, 2020; Flores & Rosa, 2015) and generational differences (Moss, 2018) on an individual's perception of writing quality. Generational differences in how writing conventions were perceived and in perspectives about writers of other generations occurred frequently in the research data and confirmed research included in the literature review around challenges associated with generational differences in the workplace. For example, I found misalignment in how members of different generations perceived the use and value of emojis in professional written communication. The reports of new hire usage of emojis in professional writing contexts illustrated the influence of rapidly changing language conventions hastened by greater reliance on communication technology amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. It also provided a concrete example of the influence of generational differences in the perception of writing quality that surfaced within the literature review. The two members of the baby boomer generation who mentioned emojis did so in a negative light, the two members of Generation X acknowledged the usefulness of emojis in some contexts and the need for audience awareness to inform the choice to use them, and a millennial respondent provided the most positive view of emojis as an important communication tool for conveying warmth and politeness. This may suggest that adaptation to evolving language standards is faster within younger generations; however, additional studies on

generational differences and perception of newer language usage trends would be needed to confirm this.

The impact of linguistic background differences was less apparent in the study data. Recent employer research included in the literature review indicated that employers sought employees who could make accurate use of “proper English” and “correct grammar”, as these skills signified professionalism and good character (Hastings et al., 2020; Ieske-Rechek, et al., 2019). These conceptions of language assume that there is one correct or proper form of English, SAE, rather than multiple dialects influenced by aspects of identity such as race, region, and culture (CCCC, n.d.). Discrimination against writers using markers of dialects other than SAE was noted in classrooms beyond the first decade of the new millennium, signifying that many professionals in the workforce now may still be influenced by outmoded and harmful perspectives about writing that, within the U.S., commonly impact Black graduates entering the workforce or changing careers. Participants did occasionally refer to “incorrect” messages, the need for “grammar” and “grammar checks” and avoiding “grammar errors” but none provided specific examples of grammar errors that would indicate a misinterpretation of dialect as incorrectness (Baker-Bell, 2020; CCCC, n.d.; Flores & Rosa, 2015). The primary complaint related to grammar inconsistencies was that they impacted the clarity of the message, though some participants noted that even seasoned professionals needed to proofread for grammar and sometimes made errors themselves.

Discourse Communities

The conceptual framework for this study was Swales's (1990) six characteristics of a discourse community. Swales researched the existence of unique genres, conventions, and lexis that develop within writing communities. He also wrote about the ways in which expectations for writing within these communities could create challenges for newcomers (Swales, 1990). This information was relevant as a conceptual framework for the study insofar as organizations, and even teams and other subgroups within organizations, represent discourse communities to which recently graduated new hires are newcomers. Swales noted in his research that newcomers learned conventions, genres, and lexis of a discourse community through participating in that community.

The six characteristics that Swales proposed are

- **Public goals:** The group has a common purpose that they work towards together.
- **Specific communication tools:** There are one or more main accepted forms of communication, such as email, newsletter, webpage, and so forth.
- **Participation enacted through writing:** Members of the community participate in membership through the exchange of written communication.
- **Genres:** Specific types of writing accepted within the group. Elements that make up genre include the kinds of topics that are welcomed for discussion and the types of information that are considered valid evidence to support claims.

- Lexis: The vocabulary used in common by the group, which may include acronyms and words that may not have the same meaning outside of the community.
- A threshold number of participants made up of novices and veterans.

Swales (1990) documented his own experience of rejection by individuals from a stamp collecting hobbyist group that communicated through a newsletter journal. By using a data analysis tool commonly employed within his scholarly field of applied linguistics to justify a claim, rather than the accepted form of valid evidence within the group (chemical analysis) he bucked genre norms. As a result, his article was enthusiastically dismissed by veteran members of the group. Of relevance to this study was that approaches that were considered “good writing” in a home discourse community were not considered as such in this new discourse community. Through trial and error, Swales learned from a veteran member the accepted source of evidence for the community.

The refrain echoed by managers telling their stories of learning within new discourse communities was that they learned, similarly, through trial and error. I did not interview any managers who had not eventually learned enough about their discourse communities to communicate effectively and be promoted, but I did hear of recent graduates who did not make it through a next step of the hiring process in part because their application materials did not meet conventions; this was consistent with research in the literature review as well (Hastings et al., 2020). Following the introduction of the

conceptual framework, I outlined discourse communities that new hire students may participate in, in addition to that of their new professional field and specific organization and team. Those included social media platforms and interest groups within them, as well as academic disciplines and university program communities. Unsurprisingly, participants remarked upon textual features and writing formats that they considered to be ineffective. One example was writing that bore resemblance to “text speak” or “tweeting”. Another example was writing for professional purposes that looked like a “masters level thesis dissertation” or an “academic paper”. Additional examples include the illegitimacy of “Wikipedia” as an information source in professional contexts, and lack of awareness and usage of standard tools such as Canva or WordPress. As Swales (1990) indicated, however, the aligned tools, genres, and lexis could only be learned through participation within the group.

The varied and tacit qualities of “good writing”, and the broad variability of these from one discourse community to the next, influenced the direction of this research towards behaviors and dispositions of effective writers, rather than what could be assessed within their writing. What was important within the framework of discourse communities was not so much that the new hires were producing writing aligned to a specific set of conventions, such as the use of bullet points, conciseness, APA format, etc. This is what prior researchers have sought to answer (Clokie & Fourie, 2016; Coffelt et al., 2019; Hastings et al., 2020; Moore & Morton, 2017; Schartel Dunn, & Lane, 2019). This study builds upon that scholarship. I wanted to learn more about what dispositions

and behaviors helped a writer to be perceived as effective by their managers. The assumption was that a writer with those qualities could produce writing that was perceived as effective across a variety of new discourse communities.

I spoke with managers participating in discourse communities across a range of industries: accounting, advertising, banking, emergency management, entertainment writing, executive coaching, food safety, government, health care, higher education, and not-for-profit. While the expected conventions may have varied, and participants may have had varied awareness of the unique aspects of their own discourse communities, their stories of effective new hire writers, and stories of how they became effective writers themselves returned responses that registered clearly into themes. This study suggests that effective writers proactively and confidently engage, as Swales did, in their new discourse community. This is, according to Swales, the way we learn, and it requires both confidence and the ability to self-start as sub-themes indicated. However, the role of audience research and self-awareness as sub-themes may have supported more efficient and positive onboarding experiences to the new discourse community, as individuals with these traits would be more likely to ask a veteran of the community questions and seek out examples to extrapolate the tools, genres, and lexis that were conventional within the community.

In this study, managers were the veteran members of the discourse community. They told stories and provided examples of how they supported new hires who were novices in their professional contexts. The most effective scenarios seemed to be when a

new hire was independent and driven, while open to asking questions when needed, and the manager was invested in teaching and supporting the new hire. Managers served a critical role by bridging the gap from what new hires knew and could do with writing to what they did not yet know. This was an important step that would help the new hires learn to write effectively. In some cases, what they needed to know to gain confidence was that they *were* writing effectively. The deeply valued impact of a veteran who was willing to support a novice in a discourse community was highlighted in the stories of key people who managers credited for doing that work for them.

In Swales's stamp collecting newsletter example, he received information about how to be perceived as credible. His success in future submissions to the group would have likely depended on whether he was open to this feedback and able to incorporate it within this new context. This orientation towards feedback could be described as flexibility. In the literature review, flexibility was a disposition that was noted in the research as helpful for managing intergenerational teams (Smith & Garriety, 2020). It was also acknowledged as under-studied (Andrade & Ziegner, 2021). While flexibility wasn't called out by name by study participants, tangential traits such as self-awareness, humility, and the ability to be self-taught were frequently named.

Limitations of the Study

This section will outline limitations to trustworthiness of the study results. At the outset of the study, I determined that I would source participants from my institution's disciplinary advisory boards. Given that managers on advisory boards might be aware of

my position as an administrator, I noted the possibility that potential participants might feel pressure to respond in a manner that I might interpret as favorable to retain their position on the board. I mitigated this risk by focusing on stories of positive behaviors and learning rather than centering the study around negative aspects of the written communication gap. I also took care to demonstrate consistent positive regard throughout the conversations. Since I was not able to find enough participants through the first method of recruitment, I submitted a modification to work with my institution's employer relations team, and through that method I was able to source enough participants to round out the pool. Managers connected to my institution in this way were more removed from direct contact with me and the risk that they would be pressured to respond favorably was lessened. Still, the precautions I described regarding my study design would have helped to mitigate any pressure they could have felt as well. I committed to following ethical guidelines, which required that I anonymously conduct the "recruitment, informed consent, and data collection" (Walden University, 2021). In doing this I sought to mitigate threats to study validity. For both recruitment strategies, a colleague sent out the recruitment letter and I only corresponded with individuals who shared an interest in participating in the study. I encrypted the interview transcripts with a password so that they remained secure. Through these methods, I took precautions to safeguard the validity and trustworthiness of the data.

Recommendations

This section addresses 2 recommendations for further study. A strength of this study was the new focus on effective writing behaviors, which has lent some new knowledge to the research on the written communication skills gap. Given that this research study was relatively small, 10 participants, additional research on this topic should be conducted to either support or disconfirm the findings and add to the scholarship in this area. In the analysis of the data, two new questions remained that would be important to address in further research. While the impact of raciolinguistic differences was covered in the literature review, I was not able to discern this as a theme in the study data. A more targeted study that focuses on manager perceptions of grammatical correctness might be able to uncover how this influence plays out in new hire writing scenarios. A second question lingered around the productive tension between independence and reliance on others. In the study, managers praised effective new hire writers for asking questions to clarify aspects of the assignment, while they also noted independence and willingness to learn on one's own as desirable qualities. Information about manager perceptions regarding which kinds of new hire questions around writing were favorable and unfavorable would be helpful to home in further how these dispositions work together to support effective writing.

Implications

This section will describe potential impacts for positive social change within higher education institutions (HEIs). I will also describe some recommendations for

practice based upon the findings of the study. Prior scholars engaged in employer research in written communication have added knowledge to the field about qualities of good writing observed by employers in written work. However, these qualities varied greatly, and employers surveyed struggled at times to articulate what they meant by “good writing”. This left open questions for some researchers. These questions included how graduate new hires were to understand which written communication skills were most prioritized in a particular organization, and how graduates could discern how to apply their written communication skills differently for different writing situations. Further information clarifying these questions could positively impact instructional effectiveness around writing across online HEI curriculum by helping administrators to prioritize and scaffold skills across standard course content and train faculty to effectively support students in developing these skills. Such improvements could have the power to enhance graduate employability and success in their future professional practice and contribute to positive social change.

The examination of behaviors and dispositions covered in this research study provides new knowledge about how recently graduated new hires can approach new writing situations successfully. The implication is that if HEIs want to support students in developing the skills to be perceived as effective writers by their managers, regardless of where they land professionally, they should prioritize the behaviors and dispositions that support effective writing practice. Assignments that assess pre-writing practices such as audience research, thinking critically about what is known and what information is still

needed about various aspects of the rhetorical situation, and planning around how the writer will link their writing choices to audience needs could help students to develop their own strategies and practice. While conventions vary widely, some of the most common conventions, such as paragraph construction and ethical integration of appropriate research in an argument still belong as writing foundations in the curriculum. Beneficial instructional content might also include information about discourse communities and their unique conventions, strategies for researching a new audience, and guidance for approaching a manager for support around learning the unique aspects of the discourse community in which they enjoy veteran status. For faculty, this study implies that they can support students' learning about the writing process by sharing their own experiences with learning how to write in new fields or professions. These are stories that they own, which are clearly highly valuable and demand less from faculty than line editing or addressing grammar rules. Resources exist for grammar and punctuation, but faculty can supply an authentic and much needed "why". When faculty members choose to integrate their stories into their teaching practice, they may very well serve as the catalyst "key person" described in this study as so critical to a learner's developing awareness of the ways that "good writing" looks different depending on one's discourse community.

Conclusion

This section provides concluding comments about the study results. The purpose of this qualitative study was to learn about employers' perspectives on the written

communication skills gap that negatively impacts recent graduates from being successful in new professions. The research focused on behaviors that support recent graduates in writing effectively in new professional settings. Existing scholarship in employer research describes an unjust situation in which bachelor's degree graduates are, in the estimation of employers, largely not prepared to write effectively in their desired professions (AAC&U, 2018, Kleckner & Butz, 2021; MacDermott & Ortiz, 2017). These scholars have indicated the need for new knowledge about the written communication skills gap to help HEI administrators decrease the barriers to employability described in the literature (Coffelt et al., 2019; Moore & Morton, 2017; Schartel et al., 2019). Scholars in the field of composition and rhetoric describe the ways in which key aspects of identity mediate perception of the quality of written communication. The genre scholar John Swales provided the conceptual framework for this study. The findings of this research provide much needed new information to help administrators of HEIs deliver upon the promise to prepare their students to write effectively in their chosen professions.

Given the amount of money and time learners invest in undergraduate study, it is imperative that HEI administrators continuously improve upon how program content addresses key skills for successful professional practice. Graduates seeking work in new professional fields will experience increased success when they are empowered with flexible approaches to writing and provided opportunities to develop self-awareness and confidence in their writing skills. While this study provides additional examples of why it is not possible for HEIs to teach every possible combination of conventions, it also

confirms that faculty members and instructional designers can provide learning interventions that help to develop effective writers, regardless of their comfort level with teaching grammar rules and mechanics. Ultimately, such practices may benefit society by decreasing systemic injustice and yielding greater security for graduates' job prospects. Organizations stand to enjoy greater success as well, as employers increasingly find that graduates are joining their teams are well-prepared to use written communication as an influential tool for effectiveness within their roles.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

Conceptual Framework

Swales's (1990) six characteristics of a discourse community provides the conceptual framework for this study. Discourse communities refer to groups of people with distinctly developed conventions, genres, and lexis that are learned by group members via participating in writing activities within the community. Questions included within this interview protocol were designed to uncover the features of the discourse communities that form the context in which study participants work and manage new hires. Of particular interest are any behavioral and dispositional qualities of new hires that have supported their ability to produce writing that is considered effective within that context. Additional data that may also emerge from the analysis of participant responses are similarities and differences of conventions in various discourse communities.

Research Question

The following research question underpinned this study: How do employers describe the written communication skills gap that hinders college graduates from being successful in their professional practice? This interview protocol is designed to help me unpack beliefs and assumptions that exist in the gap between employer expectations and new hire writing skill sets. Differences related to discourse communities, linguistic traditions, and generational membership emerged in the literature as mediating forces in how an individual assesses written communication, so questions are included that will assist me in exploring these areas. Given that many influences mediate how an individual

assesses written communication, I have chosen to focus on situations where writing has been considered effective, to learn what combination of factors and conditions appear to be present that support the employer perception of effective written communication.

Interview Protocol Form

Employer Interview Protocol

Industry: _____

Interviewee (Title and Name): _____

Interviewer: _____

Survey Section Used:

_____ A: Interview Background

_____ B: Institutional Perspective

_____ C: Assessment

_____ D: Department and Discipline

_____ E: Teaching and Learning

_____ F: Demographics (no specific questions)

Other Topics Discussed: _____

Documents Obtained: _____

Post Interview Comments or Leads:

Introductory Protocol

To facilitate our note-taking, I would like to use the transcribing feature to record our conversation today. Please sign the release form. For your information, only researchers on the project will be privy to the audio files which will be eventually destroyed after they are transcribed. In addition, you must sign a form devised to meet our human subject requirements. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary, and you may stop at any time if you feel uncomfortable, and (3) we do not intend to inflict any harm. Thank you for your agreement to participate.

I have planned this interview to last no longer than one hour. During this time, we have several questions that we would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning.

Introduction

You have been selected to speak with me today because you have been identified as someone who has a great deal to share about written communication skills required for new hires to be successful on the job. My research project as a whole focuses on the improvement of written communication teaching and learning across the online curriculum, with particular interest in understanding better what behaviors and dispositions recently graduated new hires demonstrate that are viewed as effective writers by their managers. The information gathered in this study may help administrators to develop more effective approaches to teaching writing across the undergraduate learning

pathway. This study does not aim to evaluate your knowledge of composition and rhetoric as a field. Rather, I am trying to learn more about employer perspectives around written communication and hopefully learn about effective skills related to writing that can help improve student preparedness to write effectively in the workplace.

A. Interviewee Background

How long have you been ...

_____ in your present position?

_____ in this field/industry?

Interesting background information on interviewee:

What is your highest degree? _____

What was your undergraduate/graduate field of study? _____

What generation do you consider yourself to be a member of? Ex. Baby Boomer (58-76), Gen X (42-57), Millennial (26-41), Gen Z (10-25) _____

What ethnicity do you identify as? Ex. White, Black or African American, Hispanic or Latino, Asian, Native American, Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Two or more races, Prefer not to disclose _____

1. Briefly describe your role (office, committee, classroom, etc.) as it relates to managing recently graduated new hires (if appropriate).

Probes: How are you involved in the hiring and onboarding process?

How many recently graduated new hires have you worked with over the past 5 years?

2. What has your experience been like working with recently graduated new hires as they begin to produce written communications for work purposes?

B. Institutional Perspective

1. What are the training expectations around written communication within your workplace?

Probes: Do you feel that the training is effective? Why or why not?

2. What resources are available to employees to support their written communication skills development? (Ex. templates, exemplars, writing coaches)

Probes: Are these required? Do you feel these are adequate?

C. Personal Experience

1. What are the specific needs related to writing in your particular field?

Probes: how did you learn about these conventions yourself, for your own writing? What are your own feelings about producing common written communications in the field? What are the different types of documents that are produced by individuals in the role? What are they used for?

C. New Hire Behavior

1. Tell me about an effective writer you have worked with that was or is a recently graduated new hire.

Probe: What kinds of documents were they writing? What was it about their approach that you found effective? What did their communication around the assignments look like?

D. New Hire Written Communication Reflections

1. On the whole, what aspects of a document generated for work communication purposes do you value?

Probe: Why is that? What makes for a good piece of writing?

2. What is your perception about new hire preparedness around written communication in general?

Probes: Does the assessment of written communication come up in hiring discussions? What considerations are made regarding writing quality in hiring decisions?

Post Interview Comments and/or Observations: