

REPORT OF

The National Commission
on Writing FOR AMERICA'S FAMILIES,
SCHOOLS, AND COLLEGES

Writing: A
POWERFUL MESSAGE
FROM
STATE
GOVERNMENT



JULY 2005

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SUMMARY

In its ongoing effort to examine the role of writing in the classroom and in the workplace, the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges has concluded that the ability to write well has never been more important. In today's technology-driven economy, more people than ever before are required to use the written word, yet writing continues to be an undervalued discipline. In 2003, the Commission issued its first report to Congress, *The Neglected "R": The Need for a Writing Revolution*, outlining the major problems and solutions for America's schools and colleges. In 2004, the Commission issued its second report, *Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out, A Survey of Business Leaders*, focusing on the importance of writing in business and industry. In this, its third report, the Commission analyzes the importance of writing in a large part of the public sector—the state government.

A survey of state human resources divisions by the National Governors Association concludes that writing is considered an even more important job requirement for the states' nearly 2.7 million employees than it is for the private-sector employees studied in the Commission's previous survey of leading U.S. businesses. Still, despite the high value that state employers put on writing skills, a significant numbers of their employees do not meet states' expectations. These deficiencies cost taxpayers nearly a quarter of a billion dollars annually. The human resources directors surveyed in the report oversee civil servants working in state agencies. The report does not include the close to 2 million other state employees who work in state hospitals and educational institutions, because they are hired and supervised locally.

Writing is a critical skill for professional state employees, according to 80 percent of respondents, and 50 percent agree also on its importance among clerical and support personnel. Both figures are substantially higher than comparable 2004 responses from corporate human resources directors. Forty-nine of 50 state human resources offices participated in the survey.

Among the study's findings:

- Respondents universally agree on the importance of writing for professional state employees. All 49 respondents reported that two-thirds or more of professional employees have some responsibility for writing. Nearly 60 percent of respondents also reported that clerical employees have such responsibility. “Is writing an important skill in government?” asked one respondent. “Of course. If there are tax policy directives or guidelines that the filers don’t quite get—and the tax staff reviewers don’t get right either—that creates a financial mess.”
- Writing is a basic consideration for state hiring and promotion. More than 75 percent of respondents report that they take writing into consideration in hiring and promoting professional employees. Almost half say the same thing about clerical and support staff. “I’d say there’s a premium placed on well-developed writing skills—on the ability to do analysis, develop recommendations, and show the basis for the recommendations,” said one respondent.
- State agencies frequently require writing samples from job applicants. Fully 91 percent of respondents in states that “almost always” take writing into account also require a writing sample from prospective “professional” employees. Of these states, 50 percent also require writing samples from clerical and support personnel. “Oral and writing skills are absolutely essential in a service- and knowledge-based economy. This is a very different economy from one based on agriculture or industry,” said one personnel director.
- Poorly written applications are likely to doom candidates’ chances of employment. Four of five respondents agree that poorly written materials would count against “professional” job applicants either “frequently” or “almost always.” Six of ten say the same thing about applicants for clerical and support positions. “Applicants would not be hired without these skills. Managers notice written submissions around the application process,” noted a respondent.
- Writing is a more significant promotion consideration in state government than in the private sector. In 2004, about half of all corporations in the Business Roundtable survey reported taking writing into account in professional promotion either “frequently” or “almost always.” More than 60 percent of state agencies do so. Said one state respondent: “At the higher levels, we check for how well people can organize their thoughts and respond to a complicated question.”

- Memos, correspondence, and e-mail are universal requirements in state agencies, according to personnel directors. More than half also report that policy alerts, legislative analyses, formal and technical reports, and oral presentations are “frequently” or “almost always” required. The volume of e-mail causes many state personnel directors to express concerns about the ease with which informal e-mail messages create serious communications problems. One extended comment on e-mail included the following: “E-mail is one of the leading causes of miscommunication.... The sender is composing on the spot. You might do a spell-check, but you can’t do a ‘thought-check.’ It’s like blurting out something without thinking it through.”
- Despite concerns about writing quality, 70 percent of respondents agree that large majorities of professional employees, most of the time, possess the writing skills needed in state government. Just one-third agree that new clerical and support staff possess these skills. Noted one respondent: “About 99 percent of state employees have completed high school...54 percent [hold] a bachelor’s degree or beyond. [In] the state’s general workforce...84 percent of workers have completed high school, and 22 percent have bachelor’s degrees or beyond. We have very skilled employees.”
- Still, respondents revealed that 30 percent of professionals are below standard in writing, and most states provide remedial writing training or instruction. Based on the survey responses, it appears that providing writing training costs state government about a quarter of a billion dollars annually. “We might have up to 300 employees [both professional and clerical] each year with some need for training in writing and composition,” said one respondent. “The cost?” said another, “About \$400 per employee for 8 hours of training.”

INTRODUCTION

Declaring that “Writing today is not a frill for the few, but an essential skill for the many,” the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges issued a benchmark report in April 2003, *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*.

That document called for a writing agenda for the nation. It promised that the Commission would reconstitute itself to lead an action agenda around writing. It also pledged to issue annual reports to Congress on the state of writing in the United States, both to keep the importance of written communication in the public eye and to ensure that *The Neglected “R”* was not itself being neglected on library shelves.

A subsequent publication issued in September 2004, *Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out*, reported on a survey of 120 major American corporations employing nearly 8 million people. It concluded that in today’s workplace, writing is a “threshold skill” for hiring and promotion among salaried (i.e., professional) employees. It also argued that writing is a ticket to professional opportunity, while poorly written job applications are a figurative kiss of death.

This third report from the Commission summarizes the findings of a survey of state human resources directors completed on the Commission’s behalf by the National Governors Association. Fully 49 of 50 state human resources directors completed the survey online. The Commission wants to thank them for their cooperation.

The survey’s findings reveal that although good writing is considered an even more important job requirement among state government’s nearly 2.7 million employees than it is in the private sector, a significant number of public employees do not meet states’ expectations. State government can be improved. It can be reinvented. Undoubtedly, it can be made more effective and efficient. But state government is unlikely to succeed fully in any of those endeavors as long as it is required to spend \$221 million annually improving the writing skills of state employees.

But the potential cost of inadequate writing skills within state government far exceeds these budgetary considerations. Writing is the most important way in which states translate their policies to the public. Whether it is through speeches, articles, or policy papers, written communications from states explain why state leaders do what they do and what impact their actions have on all of us. It is the way we learn about tax policies, tuition at most

colleges and universities, civil and criminal laws, and countless other mandates. Beginning with the United States Constitution, this country has always relied on clear and compelling writing to connect government with its citizens in matters both large and small.

Bob Kerrey
President
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RESPONSE RATE AND CONFIDENCE IN FINDINGS

Findings:

- Of 50 state human resources directors, 49 responded to the survey (see Table 1 for characteristics of responding states).
- Response rate: 98 percent.

State population categories	Respondents	Total 2004 population (US Census)	State employees (Survey)	Total nonfarm employees (BLS)
> 1 million	6	4,311,500	71,500	2,081,600
1 to 5 million	22	60,501,800	765,800	27,001,400
5 to 10 million	13	85,954,600	832,900	39,882,900
10 to 20 million	6	83,315,800	557,200	37,195,000
20 million+	2	58,383,800	472,000	24,017,100
Total for responding states	49	292,467,500	2,699,400	130,178,000

Discussion:

- In any survey, a response rate of more than 50 percent would be considered quite robust. The technique employed here—an online survey combined with follow-up calls to encourage replies—produced a very high return rate of 98 percent.
- The state respondents indicate that they employ nearly 2.7 million people, serving states with a combined nonfarm employment base of more than 130 million and a combined population exceeding 292 million citizens.

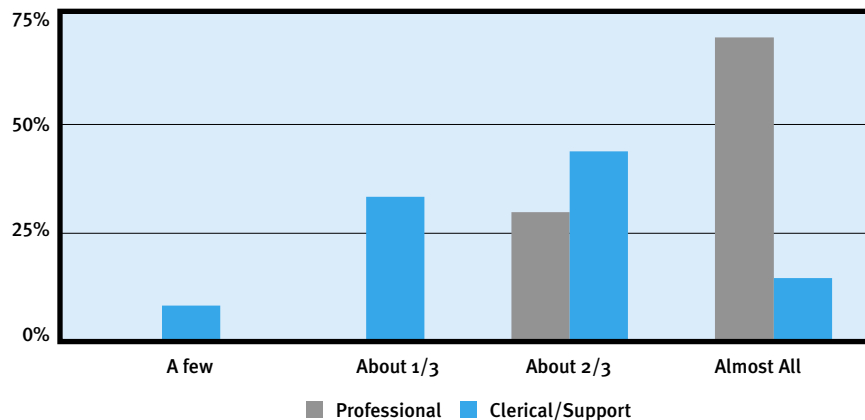
HOW IMPORTANT IS WRITING IN THE STATE WORKPLACE?

Findings:

- Writing is a universal responsibility for professional employees in state government. All 49 respondents reported that two-thirds or more of professional employees have some responsibility for writing, either explicit or implicit (see Figure 1).
- Nearly 60 percent of respondents also reported that clerical employees have some responsibility for writing.
- No human resources director indicated that “few” professional employees have any writing responsibility, and just 8.3 percent of respondents reported that just a “few” support personnel have some responsibility for writing.

Figure 1:

What Proportion of State Employees Have Some Responsibility for Writing?



Discussion:

- These findings indicate that writing is an even more significant feature of professional employment in state government than it is in the private sector.
- The Commission’s 2004 survey of corporate human resources directors indicated that two-thirds of responding corporations viewed writing as an important responsibility for “salaried” employees. Fully 100 percent of state personnel officials view writing as a significant requirement in the public sector.

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- Meanwhile, although between one-fifth and one-third of corporate employers (depending on sector) considered writing significant among “hourly” employees, nearly 60 percent of state human resources offices consider writing important for clerical and support personnel.

Respondents’ Comments:

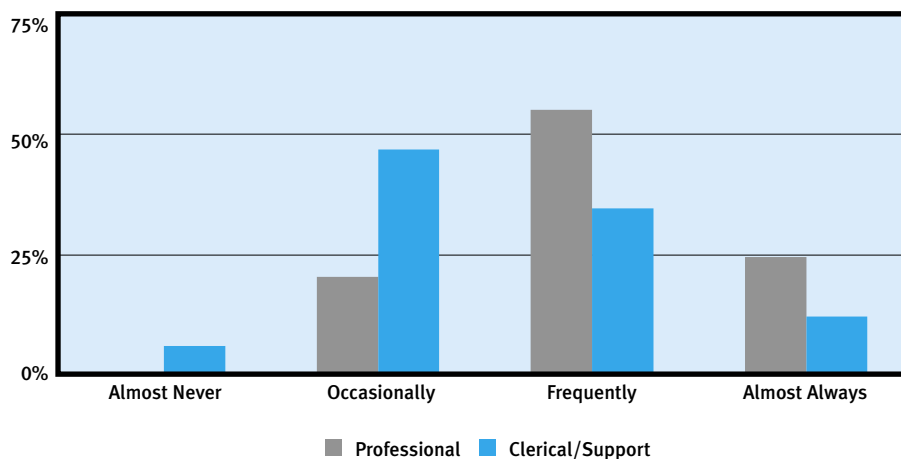
- “State employees must be able to communicate effectively and in a clear, concise manner with fellow coworkers, customers, and the public.”
- “Is writing an important skill in government? Of course. If you go to the state Web site and can’t understand the tax instructions, that would cost the state. Or if there are tax policy directives or guidelines that the filers don’t quite get—and the tax staff reviewers don’t get right either—that creates a financial mess.”
- “Take, as an example, our legislators. They come from outside government—maybe they’re in agriculture, or run businesses, or in other lines of work. They want and need good information, including background and context. They need clarity around issues.”
- “Writing skills are becoming more and more important with the prevalence of e-mail increasing the kinds and frequency of communications. For paraprofessionals, the ability to put together coherent reports is becoming more essential. Documentation is just becoming more important in many more areas.”
- “Oral and writing skills are absolutely essential...in a service- and knowledge-based economy. This is a very different economy from one based on agriculture or industry.”

IS WRITING AN IMPORTANT HIRING CONSIDERATION IN STATE GOVERNMENT?

- About 80 percent of state human resources directors say they frequently or almost always take writing into consideration when hiring professional employees (see Figure 2).
- Almost half (47 percent) also report that they frequently or almost always consider writing when hiring clerical and support personnel.
- These results indicate that writing is a basic consideration for professional employment in state government and an extremely important consideration in hiring clerical and support personnel.

Figure 2:

Do State Agencies Take Writing into Account When Hiring New Employees?



Discussion:

- Here again, writing is a more significant hiring consideration in state employment than in large corporations.
- Although 80 percent of state human resources directors report that writing is frequently or almost always taken into account in hiring “professional” employees, just half of responding companies in 2004 (51 percent) agreed with regard to hiring “salaried” employees.

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- The same general finding characterizes “hourly” employees (in the private sector) and “clerical/support” employees (in state government). Only 16 percent of corporations reported taking writing into account in hiring “hourly employees,” a proportion that nearly triples when state government hires “clerical/support” personnel.

Respondents’ Comments:

- “All employees must have writing skills to get hired now, both professional and clerical/support.”
- “I’d say there’s a premium placed on well-developed writing skills—on the ability to do analysis, develop recommendations, and show the basis for the recommendations.”
- “Grammar and reading comprehension are included in our civil service exams for clerical and support positions where these skills are required.”
- “When we hire we’re starting to look again for academic and writing skills.”
- “Writing today seems like it’s getting weaker. That’s especially true among applicants for clerical or support positions. We need them all to be able to write. It’s very disappointing.”

DO STATES REQUIRE WRITING SAMPLES FROM JOB APPLICANTS?

- Fully 91 percent of respondents in states that “almost always” take writing into account when hiring also require a writing sample from prospective “professional” employees (see Table 2).
- Half (50 percent) of those states also ask for writing samples from clerical and support personnel.
- For states that “frequently” take writing into account in hiring decisions, 41 percent require a writing sample from applicants for “professional” positions, while 18 percent report similar requirements for clerical and support personnel.
- Demands for writing samples drop off dramatically for states that only “occasionally” take writing into account. Just 20 percent of these respondents ask for a writing sample for “professional” positions, and none report requiring writing samples for clerical and support personnel.

		Professionals	Support Personnel
Writing Taken into Account in Hiring	Almost Always	91.7%	50.0%
	Frequently	40.7%	17.6%
	Occasionally	20.0%	0.0%

Discussion:

- There appears to be a clear relationship between states reporting they take writing into account in hiring and those reporting they require writing samples. The more important a factor states think writing is in hiring decisions, the more likely they are to require a sample of the applicant’s writing.

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- This state practice seems to be a more formal exercise of behavior than in the corporate world. Although only 11 percent of corporate respondents overall reported requiring writing samples for “salaried” positions, more than half (54 percent) of companies where writing is considered part of the job require writing samples and 71 percent of respondents formed impressions about applicants’ writing abilities based on letters submitted with the application materials.

Respondents’ Comments:

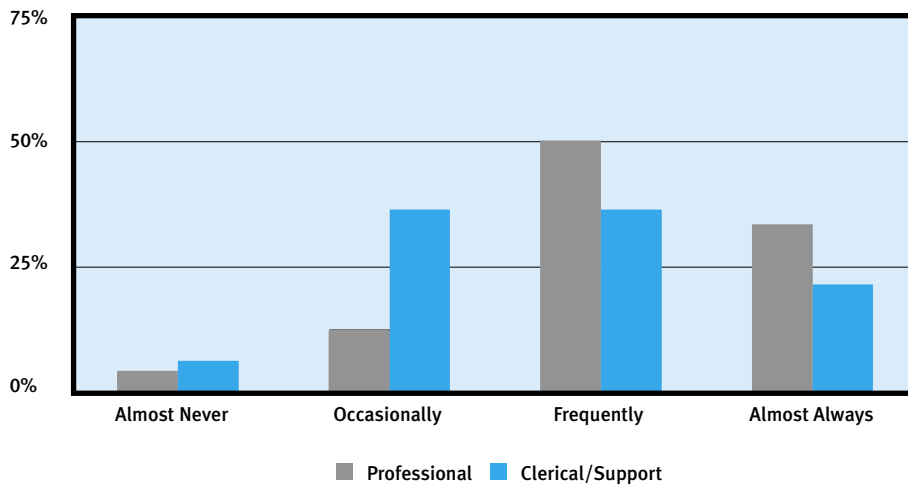
- “We check writing samples when writing is a key component of the job. Occasionally we might ask for a writing test during a job interview.”
- “We assess writing ability by checking with references and with previous employers.”
- “We don’t administer a writing test per se to applicants, since it’s a multiple-choice exam...but we always include some skill checks like noun/verb agreement or word choice.”
- “Grammar is typically the place where applicants fall down. I can’t say for sure what proportion, but it’s a high enough percentage to get attention.”

WOULD A POORLY WRITTEN APPLICATION COUNT AGAINST A JOB APPLICANT?

- More than 83 percent of state respondents report that poorly written application materials would count against a job applicant for a professional position in state government (see Figure 3).
- More than half (57 percent) also say that a poorly written application would count against applicants for clerical and support positions.

Figure 3:

Would Poorly Written Application Materials Count Against a Job Applicant?



Discussion:

- It's quite clear that taking care with the application and accompanying written materials counts for a lot during the hiring process, particularly when hiring decisions are being made for professional employment in state government.
- The findings here parallel those regarding writing as a hiring consideration. Poorly written materials count against state job applicants, just as they do in the private sector.

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- Very large proportions of both state and private sector human resources directors report that poorly written materials would count against “professional” (state) or “salaried” (private sector) job applicants either “frequently” or “almost always.” Fully 83 percent of state respondents share that view, as do 86 percent of corporate respondents.
 - More than half of responding states (57 percent) agree that a poorly written application would also count against applicants for clerical and support positions.

Respondents’ Comments:

- “Oh, yes. Applicants would not be hired without these skills. Managers notice written submissions around the application process.”
- “Personally, I would not hire anyone without essential writing skills.”
- “We are seeing more and more people with very poor skills among new employees. They’re not ready to work at the level we need.”
- “Officially, writing is not being considered or noticed. Unofficially, there’s a subtle level at which the quality of written materials influences a decision among candidates.”

WHAT KIND OF WRITING IS EXPECTED IN STATE GOVERNMENT TODAY?

- E-mail, memoranda, and correspondence are universal features of life in state government (see Table 3). All respondents reported that these forms of communication are required either “frequently” or “almost always.”
- Two-thirds or more of responding state officials also report the following forms of communications as required “frequently” or “almost always”: technical reports (65 percent), oral presentations (67 percent), and formal reports (71 percent).
- Close to 60 percent of respondents also report requirements for written legislative analysis (59 percent) and policy alerts (57 percent).

Forms of Communication	Almost Never	Occasionally	Frequently	Almost Always	Frequently or Almost Always
E-mail	0.0%	0.0%	16.3%	83.7%	100.0%
Other Memos/ Correspondence	0.0%	0.0%	59.2%	40.8%	100.0%
Formal Reports	0.0%	28.6%	57.1%	14.3%	71.4%
Oral Presentations	0.0%	32.7%	55.1%	12.2%	67.3%
Technical Reports	0.0%	34.7%	53.1%	12.2%	65.3%
Legislative Analyses	4.1%	36.7%	49.0%	10.2%	59.2%
Policy Alerts	10.2%	32.7%	42.9%	14.3%	57.2%

Discussion:

- While e-mail, memoranda, and correspondence may well be fairly straightforward writing tasks, producing legislative analyses and technical and formal reports is likely to require highly advanced writing and analytical skills. Writing in state government, in short, ranges from communicating with the general public to communicating with specialists.
- Respondents’ comments (see page 18) reveal a great deal of interest in the emerging role of e-mail as a communications device, including both its promise as a means of keeping people informed and the opportunities for confusion inherent in this relatively informal means of communication.

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- The rank order of frequency of writing tasks differs between government and the private sector. In state government, e-mail, memoranda, and correspondence are defined as most common by state respondents, followed by formal reports, oral presentations, technical reports, and legislative analyses and policy alerts. Large corporations also listed e-mail as the most common writing task in 2004, followed in order by oral presentations, memoranda and correspondence, formal reports, and technical reports.

Respondents' Comments:

- “The reality is that nearly every state job requires some form of writing, e.g., incident reports, work documentation, and so on. Public health workers, prison guards, construction and road crews—all have to write. Writing isn’t something just confined to offices these days.”
- “Internally, there might be a communication from a director about a new directive or policy. If it’s not thought through or made clear, it can stimulate rumors or create fear or anxiety about what wasn’t said, or have people going off in different directions because they got different understandings of the message.”
- “While we still produce our share of memos and letters, e-mail is quickly becoming the communication form of choice. Our experience is that people often are a little careless with how they express themselves in e-mail.”
- “The use of e-mail has had a negative effect on writing clarity. For some, it’s just a higher order of Instant Messaging. Punctuation has disappeared. Nobody uses a period. There’s no capitalization anymore. It’s more like a stream of consciousness and often hard to follow.”
- “E-mail is one of the leading causes of miscommunication....The sender is composing on the spot. You might do a spell-check, but you can’t do a ‘thought-check.’ It’s a little like blurting something out without thinking it through, or considering how it’s going to be understood by the recipient.”

HOW DO STATE OFFICIALS DEFINE GOOD WRITING?

- State human resources directors identify features of good writing that most teachers of writing would support. Nearly 100 percent of respondents agree that accuracy, solid spelling, grammar and punctuation, clarity, documentation and support, sound logic, and conciseness are either “important” or “extremely important” characteristics of good writing (see Table 4).
- Visual appeal and scientific precision are also highly desirable, but not as significant.
- When it comes to defining what is “extremely important” in good writing, the rank order of responses is: accuracy; solid fundamentals; clarity; documentation; and sound logic. Fewer than 50 percent of respondents reported that concision, scientific precision, or visual appeal (such as in PowerPoint presentations) was extremely important, with just 12 percent of respondents considering visual appeal to be extremely important.

Characteristics of Good Writing	Completely Unimportant	Not Very Important	Important	Extremely Important	Important or Extremely Important
Accuracy	0.0%	0.0%	12.2%	87.8%	100.0%
Solid Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation	0.0%	0.0%	28.6%	71.4%	100.0%
Clarity	0.0%	0.0%	30.6%	69.4%	100.0%
Well Documented and Supported	0.0%	0.0%	38.8%	61.2%	100.0%
Logical	0.0%	2.0%	42.9%	55.1%	98.0%
Concise	0.0%	0.0%	57.1%	42.9%	100.0%
Scientific Precision	0.0%	20.4%	46.9%	30.6%	77.5%
Visual Appeal	2.0%	6.1%	79.6%	12.2%	91.8%

Discussion:

- State governments have to communicate with every citizen, from relatively unskilled school dropouts doing manual labor to academic researchers at the frontiers of knowledge. Government communications, therefore, have to be accurate, clear, and comprehensible to the broadest imaginable constituency.
- Separate analyses by state size and number of state employees reveal no systematic differences in responses. In other words, the characteristics of good writing that state respondents value are apparently independent of the size and complexity of state government.
- Business Roundtable respondents provided similar responses. Fully 90 percent or more of personnel directors agreed that the following are either “important” or “extremely important” characteristics of good writing: accuracy; clarity; solid fundamentals; and conciseness. Two-thirds or more of corporate respondents also reported that scientific precision and visual appeal is “important” or “extremely important.”

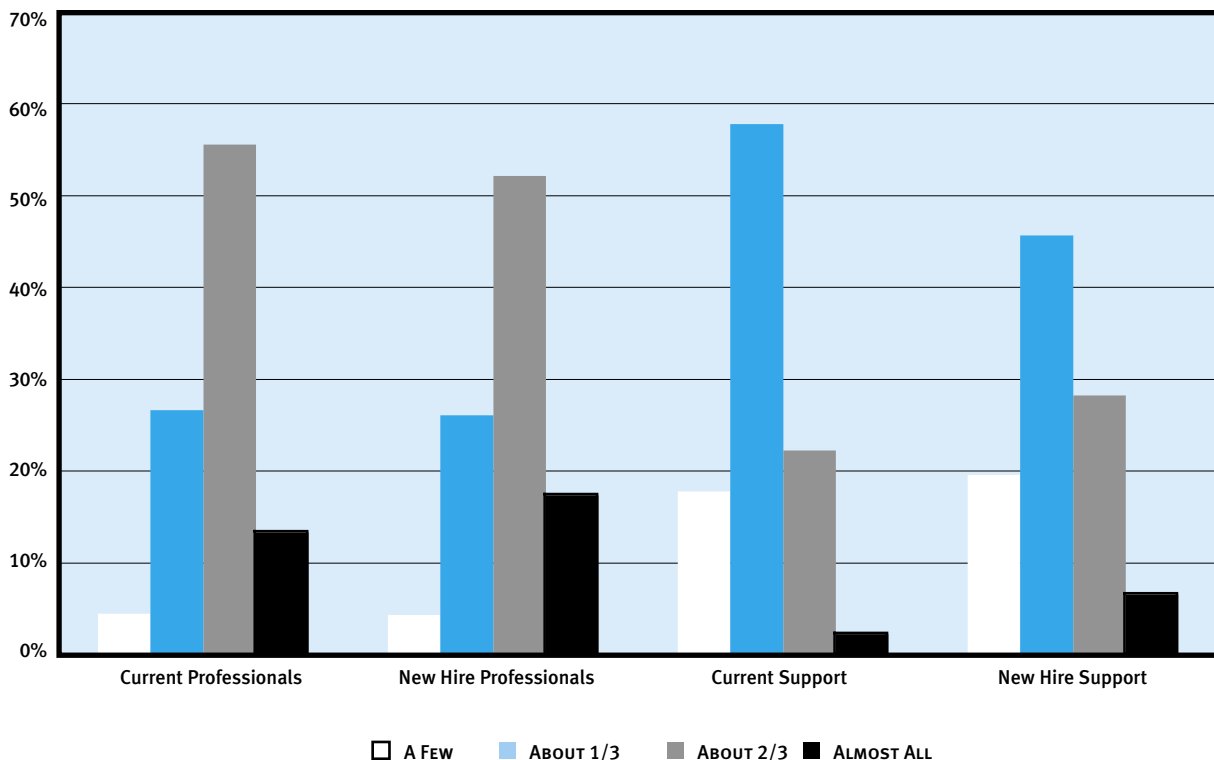
Respondents’ Comments:

- “The primary thing is that writing is an essential skill. Every job requires the ability to communicate in writing. When putting out information for the general public, we generally aim for about an eighth-grade reading level to be sure that as many people as possible can understand it.”
- “I think that good writers are good thinkers, and vice versa.”
- “Critical thinking is the most important skill, and the ability to keep focused and stay on subject. Often, we don’t see that.”
- “The biggest thing is keeping aware of who your audience is, who the reader is, and conveying your content in a way that the recipient can easily understand and use. That’s a big part of what we look for.”
- “When you discuss writing, you need to discuss both grammar and style. Grammar is required and necessary for effective writing; however, there needs to be more emphasis on the style of writing. Government as a whole has been notorious for tedious and laborious writing.”

DO EMPLOYEES HAVE THE WRITING SKILLS STATE GOVERNMENT SEEKS?

- Seven out of 10 respondents agree that large majorities of professional employees (current and new hires) possess the writing skills needed in state government. That is to say, they agree that “about two-thirds” or “almost all” professional employees have these skills (see Figure 4).
- By contrast, only one-third of respondents agree that new clerical and support staff possess these skills, a proportion that falls to one-quarter among current clerical and support staff.
- Responses clearly distinguish between the skills of professional state employees and those working in clerical and support positions. The responses also reveal a perception of some improvement among new clerical and support hires.

Figure 4:
What Proportion of Current and New Employees Have the Writing Skills Desired?



Discussion:

- The picture outlined in Figure 4 is a generally positive one at the professional level. Still, approximately one-third of respondents indicate that, at most, one-third of professional employees, both current and new, possess the writing skills valued in government.
- Respondents indicated that the proportion of state employees holding high school diplomas and college degrees markedly exceeds the proportion in the general population. On the assumption that more years of schooling will, on average, relate to stronger writing skills, one inference is that writing skills in state government are likely to be better developed than among the general workforce.
- Since nearly one-in-three professional state employees does not possess adequate writing skills, writing deficiencies are likely to be even more pronounced in the general workforce.
- Separate analyses indicate that states reporting they place a higher value on writing are also more likely to report that a larger percentage of their professional employees demonstrate the writing qualities their human resources directors value. These are typically the respondents who report that their state agencies consider writing in hiring and promotion decisions.

Respondents' Comments:

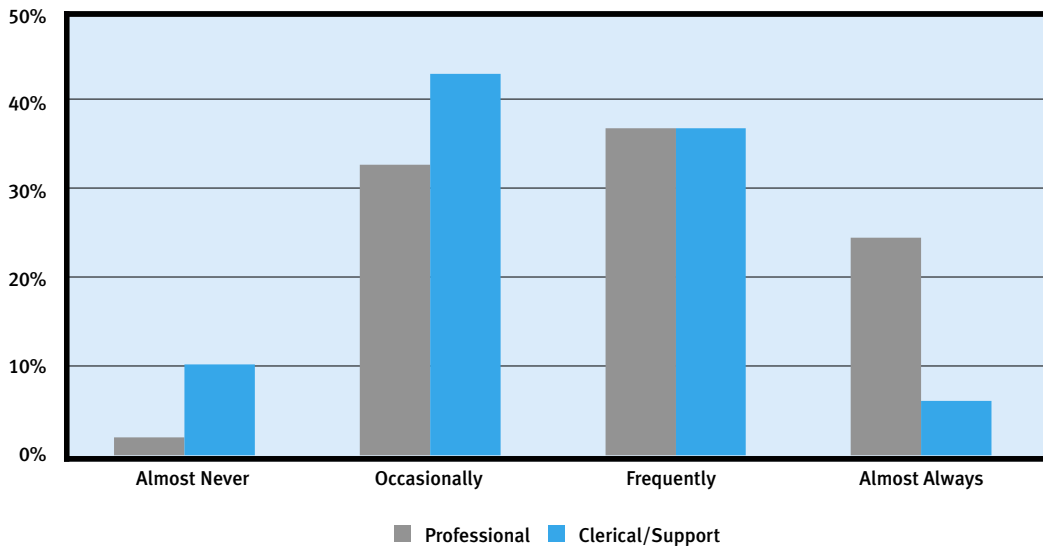
- “In our state, 99 percent of state employees have completed high school. About 82 percent have formal education or a trade-school background beyond high school; that includes 54 percent with a bachelor’s degree or beyond. This compares to the state’s general workforce where just 84 percent of workers have completed high school and 22 percent have bachelor’s degrees or beyond. We have very skilled employees. We are proud of their abilities, their motivation, and their work ethic.”
- “In the Personnel Office, we handle a lot of written appeals from state employees as well as applications for various positions or promotions. We see quite a bit of poor writing.”
- “I’m amazed at how many people with top education credentials have really poor writing skills. I wonder how they can get credentials and degrees without being able to write sentences that make sense?”
- “English composition seems to have fallen off the list of things that count in college.”

IS WRITING A PROMOTION CRITERION IN STATE GOVERNMENT?

- Fully 98 percent of respondents report that writing is taken into account in professional promotion decisions at least “occasionally.” That includes more than 60 percent who agree that writing is a promotion consideration “frequently” or “almost always” (see Figure 5).
- Respondents also indicate that writing is taken into consideration, at least “occasionally,” 9 out of 10 times in promotion decisions for clerical and support personnel. More than 40 percent of respondents agree that writing is a promotion factor for clerical and support personnel either “frequently” or “almost always.”
- While writing seems to be a significant promotion consideration, it appears to be a somewhat less important factor in promotion than in hiring. One-third of respondents reported that writing skills are “almost always” considered when hiring, a proportion that falls to one-quarter when promotion decisions are being made.

Figure 5:

Do State Agencies Take Writing into Account When Promoting Employees?



Discussion:

- Writing is a considerably more powerful promotion consideration in state government than in the corporate sector.
- In the 2004 survey, about half of all companies took writing into account in “salaried” promotion either “frequently” or “almost always.” More than 60 percent of state agencies do so for “professional” employees.
- Meanwhile, although 40 percent of state respondents report that writing is a promotion consideration for clerical and support personnel, 95 percent of corporate human resources directors reported that writing is “never” or “only occasionally” considered as part of promotion decisions for “hourly” employees.

Respondents’ Comments:

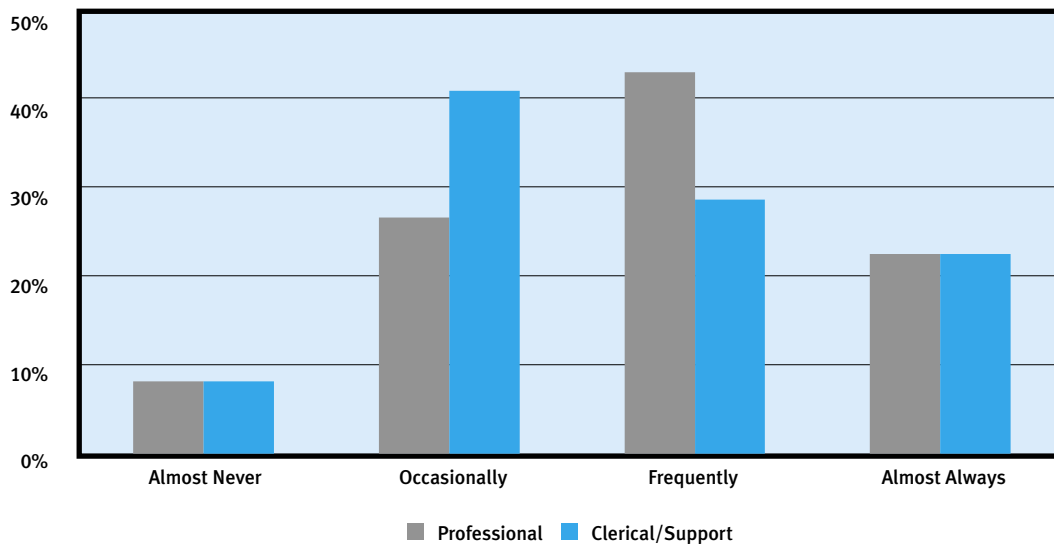
- “If someone is hoping for promotion, I would always encourage them to get some business writing training to improve their chances.”
- “At the higher levels, we check for how well people can organize their thoughts and respond to a complicated question. That’s as important in technology as anywhere else. You have to be able to give your audience a good understanding of the subject.”
- “For technical employees and skilled personnel, e.g., engineers or planners, the inability to write clearly has an impact. They must put all kinds of information and detail into written form—it has to be succinct and understandable to nontechnical people including legislators, boards, and citizens.”
- “Writing isn’t listed, per se, as a promotion criterion, but most of the time it would probably have some influence.”

DOES STATE GOVERNMENT PROVIDE REMEDIAL WRITING TRAINING? IF SO, HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?

- Two-thirds of respondents report that their states provide training for professionals (either “frequently” or “almost always”) if the employees’ technical skills are good but their writing skills are poor (see Figure 6).
- More than 50 percent report that their states also provide training for clerical and support personnel at the same rate.
- Nearly one-quarter “almost always” provide such training for both professional and clerical/support personnel.
- Providing writing training for otherwise solid employees is reported to be near universal, at both the professional and clerical/support levels. Less than 10 percent of respondents report that their state agencies “almost never” provide such training.

Figure 6:

Would State Agencies Provide Writing Training if Technical Skills Were Good but Writing Skills Poor?



Discussion:

- State practice on training is quite distinct from practice in the private sector. Only 40 percent of corporate personnel directors reported providing writing training “frequently” or “almost always” for “salaried” employees, compared to two-thirds of states reporting similar opportunities for “professional” employees.
- Although 81 percent of corporate respondents “never” or “only occasionally” provide writing training for “hourly” employees, the comparable proportion for state agencies falls to 50 percent.
- Where employees need training in writing skills and states provide such assistance, the estimated average cost is \$425 per employee (see Appendix A). Respondents’ comments indicate a wide range of cost estimates, from \$35 per employee to \$5,000.
- The Commission estimates that annual costs for providing writing training approach a quarter of a billion dollars (see Appendix A).
- This figure includes state agency employees. It does not include employees in other sectors of government (federal or local) or employees in state-supported hospitals or institutions of higher education.

Respondents’ Comments:

- “Of all the training we offer, writing courses are always among the most popular and most likely to be requested.”
- “We provide internally for business and technical writing. In fact, these are our most sought-after seats. It used to be management development classes. Now we have requests to do more with writing.”
- “We offer training in business writing, with a significant amount of attention given to basic grammar skills. It’s a pretty even split: employees may self-refer, or supervisors may send them.”
- “Costs? Hard to say. Probably similar to the cost of attending a quarter at a local community college.”
- “It costs the state \$400 per employee for 8 hours of training.”
- “We might have up to 300 employees [both professional and clerical] each year with some need for training in writing and composition.”

IMPLICATIONS

In its initial report, *The Neglected “R,”* the Commission called for a writing agenda for the nation that would include a comprehensive writing policy in state school standards while doubling the amount of time students spend writing. More financial resources devoted to writing, more time for writing, fair and authentic assessment of writing competence, and the application of new technologies to the teaching, development, and assessment of writing were all defined as central components of this new national writing agenda.

The Commission’s 2004 report on corporate views about writing, *Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out*, concluded that writing is both a “marker” and a “gatekeeper” of professional employment in the private sector. What the Commission meant by those terms was that writing “marks” a key skill taken for granted in upper-income, professional work; one that simultaneously opens opportunities for salaried employment for those able to write while closing off those opportunities for those unable to write. The ability to write and express thoughts clearly on paper is a significant equity consideration for many low-income and minority students, particularly for English-language learners.

Each of those earlier reports also stressed that writing still consists of an ancient trilogy of grammar, rhetoric, and logic. Reduced to its fundamentals, writing is an exercise in saying things correctly, saying them well, and saying them in a way that makes sense.

The survey reported here represents the opinions of 49 of 50 state personnel directors. These opinions, like those of business leaders, are a valuable asset in the Commission’s understanding of the significance of writing in American life. Although these findings cover a workforce that, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, accounts for just 3.5 percent of all U.S. employment, that workforce is a critical leadership resource in American life and the clarity of its communications is essential to the functioning of a democratic society.

This report both confirms and extends the Commission’s earlier findings. What this survey reveals is that writing seems to be a more significant consideration in public employment than in private. It also suggests that the requirements for writing clarity, accuracy, and facility in moving among different audiences are even more demanding in state government than in corporate America. As one respondent told the Commission, a government’s written notices must be accessible and comprehensible to an audience that includes school dropouts and university graduates. Another stressed that within state agencies, government functioning is daily threatened by vague or inconsistent written instructions. Meanwhile, legislative analyses must be sophisticated enough to respond to compelling questions of

public policy and sufficiently accessible to serve as guides to action for part-time state legislators. In government, writing is the servant of many masters.

In short, this survey provides new evidence and energy in support of the Commission's earlier conclusions. Writing is how students connect the dots in their learning. It is how graduates connect the dots in their careers in the private sector. And it is how public servants connect with themselves and their constituents.

Without writing, government would not function long, or well.

APPENDIXES

A. Notes on Methodology

B. Summary of *The Neglected 'R'*

C. Summary of *Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out*

D. Members of the National Commission on Writing

E. Questionnaire

F. Acknowledgments

APPENDIX A

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

Last winter, after issuing a report describing the perceptions of business leaders on the importance of writing in the workplace, members of the National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools, and Colleges agreed that its third report should focus on government and writing. Following discussions with the chair of the National Governors Association (NGA), Governor Mark Warner of Virginia, NGA agreed to collaborate in developing and administering a survey that would probe the perceptions of state personnel leaders about the importance of writing in the public sector.

Over the course of several weeks, a brief questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire (reproduced in Appendix E) was designed with three criteria in mind. First, it should track many of the questions earlier posed to corporate human resources directors to facilitate comparisons between the two sectors. Second, respondents should be able to complete the questionnaire easily and quickly. Third, it should distinguish between "professional" and "clerical/secretarial" employees, just as the corporate survey distinguished between "salaried" and "hourly" employees.

Under cover of a letter from Governor Warner, NGA staff sent an e-mail inviting state human resources directors to participate in the writing survey, which was administered online via the Internet, beginning in late January. To maintain the confidentiality of survey responses, NGA tracked and saved the responses, alerting Commission staff to nonrespondents so that follow-up telephone calls could be placed encouraging participation. Data collection was completed by April 1, at which point NGA staff provided aggregate data for the Commission's analysis. Forty-nine of 50 state human resources directors responded.

The National Governors Association (NGA), founded in 1908, is the instrument through which the nation's governors collectively influence the development and implementation of national policy and apply creative leadership to state issues. Its members are the governors of the 50 states, three territories, and two commonwealths. While the NGA provided the data for the report, the Commission is solely responsible for the report's findings and analysis.

Which State Employees Are Included in the Estimates Provided by Human Resources Directors?

The survey did not define a "state employee." It seems clear that the human resources directors provided estimates that the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) would define as "state employees excluding hospitals and educational institutions." (Under educational

institutions, BLS includes institutions of higher education, but not local K–12 schools.)

According to BLS, total state employment (including hospitals and educational institutions) amounted to 4.48 million in 2004. Excluding hospitals and educational institutions, total state employment amounted to 2.67 million in that year, very close to the 2.69 million reported by human resources directors for 2005.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Industry at a Glance*, April 2005. (Washington: U.S. Department of Labor, April 12, 2005.)

Do These Results Accurately Reflect the Views of State Human Resources Directors?

Yes. The Commission and NGA surveyed the universe of state human resources directors and obtained a response rate of 98 percent.

What Lies Behind the Cost Estimate Provided in the Body of the Document?

The number of current employees for this estimate can be taken directly from the survey; the number of new employees was calculated using state reports of turnover among state employees available from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

However, survey results on cost of training per employee were more difficult to determine. The estimates offered by state respondents ranged from \$35 per employee to \$5,000. By contrast, the training cost estimates provided in the Commission's 2004 survey of corporate leaders were much more specific, averaging around \$950 per employee for writing. Estimating conservatively, the Commission assigned a value of \$425 per employee (50 percent of costs in the private sector) as the average cost of writing training for current and new employees.

Below is a description of the assumptions built into the Commission's estimate.

Data used (source is the survey of state personnel directors):

- Number of professional and clerical/support employees.
- Average proportion of current and new workers who do not have the writing skills required by the state.
- Proportion of states providing writing training.
- Average cost of providing writing training for current and new employees.

Based on these factors, the Commission calculates:

Annual cost of training new professional employees in writing:	\$ 23,700,000
Annual cost of training new clerical/support employees in writing:	\$ 3,500,000
Annual cost of training current salaried employees in writing:	\$ 162,000,000
Annual cost of training current clerical/support employees in writing:	\$ 32,000,000
Grand total:	\$221,200,000 annually

These estimates apply only to state employees (excluding hospitals and educational institutions). They do not include local employees (including those in local public schools), a workforce totaling 13.5 million.

APPENDIX B

SUMMARY OF THE NEGLECTED “R”: THE NEED FOR A WRITING REVOLUTION

American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution places language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Yet, although models of effective writing practice exist, throughout the school and college years, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly short-changed. Disciplinary content properly deserves the attention it receives. This Commission holds no brief for the idea that writing can be improved while substance is ignored. Still, writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. And writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom.

Here are the Commission’s recommendations about what will be required to create a writing revolution and some suggestions about how to launch it:

A Writing Agenda for the Nation

- Every state should revisit its education standards to make sure they include a comprehensive writing policy that doubles the amount of time and resources devoted to writing while requiring a writing plan in every school.
- Congress and the White House should put the power of the “bully pulpit” to work through a White House Conference on Writing.
- State policy should also require teacher education programs to provide instruction in writing theory and practice for all prospective teachers.
- State policy should also require a writing plan in every school, insist that writing be taught in all subjects and at all grade levels, and require courses in teaching writing for all prospective teachers.
- Higher education has a special role to play in teaching teachers to write and also in improving writing instruction in colleges and universities for all students.

Time

- The Commission believes the amount of time students spend writing (and the scale of financial resources devoted to writing) should be at least doubled.
- Writing should be assigned across the curriculum.
- More out-of-school time should also be used to encourage writing.

Teachers and Professional Development

- Common expectations about writing should be developed across disciplines through in-service workshops designed to help teachers understand good writing and develop as writers themselves.
- Writing is everybody's business and state and local curriculum guidelines should require writing in every curriculum area and at all grade levels.
- Writing opportunities that are developmentally appropriate should be provided to every student, from the earliest years through secondary school.
- Universities should advance common expectations by requiring courses in teaching writing for all prospective teachers. Teachers need to understand writing as a complex (and enjoyable) form of learning and discovery, both for themselves and for their students.
- Special opportunities exist to draw on the talents of English-language learners through university–school partnerships that encourage greater experimentation and the development of new model programs to improve teaching and learning for English-language learners.

Technology

- Congress and the White House should extend the underlying premise of recent telecommunications policy (recognizing that the national technological infrastructure for education is as critical to the United States in the twenty-first century as highways were in the twentieth). They can do so by creating a National Educational Technology Trust to finance hardware, software, and training for every student and teacher in the nation.

- Private and public leaders should work with educators to apply new technologies to the teaching, development, grading, and assessment of writing.
- Applications that save students time when writing and that correct and comment on student papers should be explored, developed, and implemented.
- The Commission supports a massive investment in research to explore the potential of new and emerging technologies to correct mistakes in grammar; to encourage students to share their work; to permit the assessment of writing samples; and to incorporate software into measuring student writing competence.

Measuring Results

- Public and private leaders and assessment experts must ensure that assessment of writing competence is fair and authentic.
- Standards, curriculum, and assessment must be aligned, across the curriculum and in writing, in reality as well as in rhetoric.
- Assessments of student writing must go beyond multiple-choice, machine-scorable items to include requirements that students actually produce a piece of prose during the assessment.
- Best practice in assessment within states should be more widely replicated.

An Action Agenda

- To move this national writing agenda forward, the Commission proposes a five-year Writing Challenge for the nation and seeks the support of leaders from education, government, business, and the philanthropic world for this Challenge. The Challenge should issue progress reports, map the terrain ahead, and provide assistance to educators on the many details that remain to be ironed out on topics such as assessment and the best use of technology.

Issued: April 2003

APPENDIX C

SUMMARY OF WRITING: A TICKET TO WORK...OR A TICKET OUT A SURVEY OF BUSINESS LEADERS

A survey of 120 major American corporations employing nearly 8 million people concludes that in today's workplace writing is a "threshold skill" for hiring and promotion among salaried (i.e., professional) employees. Survey results indicate that writing is a ticket to professional opportunity, while poorly written job applications are a figurative kiss of death. Estimates based on the survey returns reveal that employers spend billions annually correcting writing deficiencies. The survey, mailed to 120 human resources directors in corporations associated with Business Roundtable, produced responses from 64 companies, a 53.3 percent response rate.

Among the survey findings:

- Writing is a "threshold" skill for both employment and promotion, particularly for salaried employees. Half the responding companies report they take writing into consideration when hiring professional employees. "In most cases, writing ability could be your ticket in ... or it could be your ticket out," said one respondent.
- People who cannot write and communicate clearly will not be hired, and are unlikely to last long enough to be considered for promotion. "Poorly written application materials would be extremely prejudicial," said one respondent. "Such applicants would not be considered for any position."
- Two-thirds of salaried employees in large American companies have some writing responsibility. "All employees must have writing ability....Manufacturing documentation, operating procedures, reporting problems, lab safety, waste-disposal operations—all have to be crystal clear," said one human resources director.
- Eighty percent or more of the companies in the service and finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) sectors, the corporations with greatest employment growth potential, assess writing during hiring. "Applicants who provide poorly written letters wouldn't likely get an interview," commented one insurance executive.
- A similar dynamic is at work during promotions. Half of all companies take writing into account when making promotion decisions. One succinct comment: "You can't move up without writing skills."
- More than half of all responding companies report that they "frequently" or "almost always": produce technical reports (59 percent), formal reports (62 percent), and memos and correspondence (70 percent). Communication through e-mail and PowerPoint presentations is almost universal. "Because of e-mail, more employees have to write more often. Also a lot more has to be documented," said one respondent.

- More than 40 percent of responding firms offer or require training for salaried employees with writing deficiencies. Based on the survey responses, it appears that remedying deficiencies in writing may cost American firms as much as \$3.1 billion annually. “We’re likely to send out 200–300 people annually for skills-upgrade courses like ‘business writing’ or ‘technical writing,’” said one respondent.

Business Roundtable (www.businessroundtable.org) is an association of chief executive officers of some of the leading U.S. corporations. The chief executives are committed to advocating public policies that foster vigorous economic growth and a dynamic global economy. The Roundtable’s members represent corporate leaders in manufacturing, finance, services, and high technology. The Roundtable encouraged its members to participate in the survey, which was developed and administered by the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges.

Issued: September 2004

A P P E N D I X D

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AMERICA'S FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COLLEGES**

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Taylor Branch	Author, <i>Parting the Waters</i>
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APPENDIX E

NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION SURVEY ON WRITING AND STATE WORKFORCE

Survey on Writing & State Workforce



NATIONAL GOVERNORS ASSOCIATION

Exit this survey >>

Survey on Writing & State Workforce

Message from Governor Mark Warner, NGA Chairman

Greetings to State Personnel Directors,

As the Chairman of the National Governors Association, I am asking for your assistance on a very valuable project. The National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges recently reported that writing is a neglected element in the education reform movement (The Commission's report, The Neglected 'R', is available online at www.writingcommission.org).



The Commission is working diligently on this issue, and former U.S. Senators Bob Kerrey of Nebraska and Alan Simpson of Wyoming are chairing the follow-on efforts. Earlier this year, the Commission surveyed the Business Roundtable about the importance of writing in the modern workforce.

Now I am turning to the 50 states and asking for state personnel directors to participate in a similar survey that will measure how writing is used in the hiring process and evaluating job performance of state employees. The survey which follows should take no more than five minutes to complete and your replies will form the core of a report to be submitted later this year to the White House and the Congress. Let me assure you that the actual survey replies and the identities of the respondents will be kept in strictest confidence; only the raw data will be used to assemble this very important report.

Please click the "Next" button at the bottom of the page to begin the survey. If you have any questions about the survey, please contact Peter Wiley with the National Governors Association (202/624-7895 or pwiley@nga.org). Thank you in advance for your cooperation and assistance.

Mark Warner
Governor of Virginia
Chairman of the National Governors Association

http://www.surveymonkey.com/Users/51775123/Surv...ECA63BA.asp?U=22173804822&DO_NOT_COPY_THIS_LINK (1 of 2)1/25/2005 11:24:18 AM

APPENDIX E

QUESTIONNAIRE

National Governors Association

In collaboration with the National Commission on Writing, the National Governors Association is interested in exploring the extent to which you judge writing competence to be an important skill in the state's workforce. We are interested in your opinions and your state's experience, not in what you hear about challenges elsewhere.

Your answers will automatically be saved online as you proceed through the survey. If necessary, you may stop and resume work on the survey at a later time if you access the survey link each time through the same computer. **Survey replies are requested by Friday, February 4, 2005.**

1. State population (approximately):

- 1 million or less
- 1–5 million
- 5–10 million
- 10–20 million
- 20 million or more

2. Number of state employees (estimate): _____

3. Do state agencies take writing (e.g., of technical reports, memos, annual reports, external communications) into account when hiring new employees for state agencies?

Professional: Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always

Clerical/Support: Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always

4. What proportion of state employees have some responsibility for writing (either explicit or implicit) in their position descriptions?

Professional: A Few About 1/3 About 2/3 Almost 100%

Clerical/Support: A Few About 1/3 About 2/3 Almost 100%

5. When the state is hiring new employees, how often are samples of written materials or presentations required of the applicant?

Professional: Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always

Clerical/Support: Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always

6. When a job either explicitly or implicitly requires writing skills, how do state agencies usually assess job applicants' writing abilities? (Please check all that apply.)

- Writing samples provided by applicant
- Writing test during job interview
- Review of course work on résumé
- Impressions based on letter/written application
- Other (please specify)

7. If a job applicant's letter or other written materials were poorly composed (i.e., grammatically incorrect or hard to understand) would that count against the applicant in hiring?

- Professional:** Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always
- Clerical/Support:** Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always

8. Listed below are several forms of communication common to state offices. Please indicate how frequently each is used in your state:

	Almost Never	Occasionally	Frequently	Almost Always
A. E-mail correspondence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B. Other memoranda & correspondence	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C. Oral presentations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
D. Formal reports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
E. Technical reports	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
F. Policy Alerts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
G. Legislative Analysis	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

9. Good writing can have a number of different characteristics. In your personal view, how important are each of the characteristics outlined below?

	Completely Unimportant	Not Very Important	Important	Extremely Important
A. Accuracy	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
B. Clarity	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
C. Conciseness	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
D. Scientific precision	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
E. Visual appeal	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
F. Logical	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

G. Well documented, supported

H. Solid spelling, punctuation, and grammar

10. In your CURRENT workforce, approximately what proportion of state employees possess the skills listed above?

Professional: A Few About 1/3 About 2/3 Almost 100%

Clerical/Support: A Few About 1/3 About 2/3 Almost 100%

11. Approximately what proportion of NEW employees possess these skills?

Professional: A Few About 1/3 About 2/3 Almost 100%

Clerical/Support: A Few About 1/3 About 2/3 Almost 100%

12. Do state agencies take effective writing skills into account when making promotion decisions?

Professional: Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always

Clerical/Support: Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always

13. If a state employee possessed outstanding technical ability but poor writing skills, would state agencies normally provide writing training?

Professional: Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always

Clerical/Support: Almost Never Occasionally Frequently Almost Always

14. If state agencies provide writing training (in- or out-of-house), what is your estimate of the annual costs per trained employee?

15. What else would you like to add? Please feel free to comment below. (Your comments are as valuable as the data!)

Thank you for completing the survey!

Your response will help us measure how writing is used in the hiring process and job performances of state employees. If you have questions about the survey, please contact Peter Wiley with the National Governors Association (202/624-7895 or pwiley@nga.org).

Please click "Done" or "Exit this Survey" and your completed survey will automatically be sent to NGA.

Thank you again for your input!

APPENDIX F

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Commission wants to thank the people who made this report possible.

Our first acknowledgment goes to the state human resources officials who took the time to complete the survey.

We also want to acknowledge the contributions of the National Governors Association's Office of Management Consulting and Training for putting the survey on the Internet, tracking responses, and providing aggregate data.

Several members of the College Board staff provided impressive professional assistance: Alan Heaps, vice president of the College Board, spearheaded the effort, drawing on the talents of Chiara Coletti, vice president of Communications and Public Affairs, and Sandra Riley, associate director of Communications and Public Affairs.

Finally, we want to thank James Harvey, Mary Beth Celio, and Judy Vitzthum of James Harvey and Associates in Seattle, for their efforts on our behalf. Harvey and Celio helped develop the initial questionnaire, analyzed the returns, and wrote this report. Vitzthum devoted her time and energy to contacting nonrespondents by telephone to encourage them to complete the survey.