



Why Managers Should Invest in Writing Training

Pam Hurley, PhD
www.hurleywrite.com
877-24WRITE (249-7483)
Feb. 2011

This white paper discusses the need for writing training in organizations, what managers can do to correct employee writing, and what to consider when outsourcing such training.

Why Invest in Writing Training

For many firms, these are tough economic times and training, even training that's necessary to update or maintain workers' skills, is often considered a luxury. In short, training budgets are typically the first to be cut from already strained budgets. In addition, when the training doesn't seem to necessarily result in a tangible product, it may be put aside until profits improve or be forgotten about altogether.

Such may be the case with writing training, especially when management may not be involved daily with those doing the writing. In some circumstances, management doesn't see the need for writing skills' training because by the time they get a document it's been revised, rewritten, and polished. Other times, management may assume that if a person is doing a certain job, s/he has the writing skills necessary for that job. In other cases, management may be unaware of the wasted time, energy, and resources that result from sloppy documents created by writers who lack appropriate training. This white paper addresses each of these.

1. Stop editing or rewriting the work of your staff. More often than not, when we're asked to teach an onsite course, it's because a department head or supervisor is tired of rewriting the staff's work. "Editing isn't in my job description" or "I wasn't hired to rewrite my staff's reports," they complain. And indeed, editing isn't their job. So, why do they spend so much time editing? Because ultimately, the quality of the report that they send to management reflects their competence and professionalism as well as that of their department and staff; consequently, they're compelled and responsible for ensuring that the document meets readers' needs and is clear, concise, and to the point. Unfortunately, the time spent on revising and rewriting is often time that the supervisor or department head should be allocating to other tasks. The result may be resentment and burnout on the part of the person who's being required to do the editing and rewriting, with other tasks being put off or done hurriedly.
2. Correct employee writing inefficiencies. Unfortunately, if management sees only the final, polished product, they may be unaware of just how poor their staff's writing really is. A recent Communicare survey of Canadian workers bears this out: 58 percent of workers spend as many as 4 hours each day reading emails, reports, memos, and online text, which is about 50 percent of a day's work! According to this survey, because of poor writing, much of that time is wasted: "71 percent of respondents have heard complaints about writing quality, 63 percent noted writing errors, 70 percent claimed lost productivity as results, and 85 percent say poor writing wastes time." ¹ Certainly, wasting readers' time affects a company's profitability and worker productivity, not only in the actual time spent reading, but in answering the questions that are sure to arise and in clarifying points of the original document.

¹ <http://www.marketwire.com/press-release/NEW-SURVEY-SHOWS-CANADIAN-PRODUCTIVITY-DRAIN-589690.htm>

3. Face it: most employees leave college with poor writing skills. In many cases, the assumption is that if an employee has graduated from college or has an advanced degree that s/he also has, if not good, then adequate, writing skills. Consider that the vast majority of universities require only two semesters of writing, and those in the first year, and many, if not most, universities don't require much writing even when students are taking classes in their discipline. A recent study shows that "in a typical semester...50 percent [of students] did not take a course with the necessary writing requirements. Over the entire four-year college experience, 50 percent of students had taken five or fewer courses that required significant writing...." ² This means that most students are taking an average of one course per academic year that requires them to write. Another survey of corporate executives indicates that (47 percent) report that two-year college graduates have deficient writing skills.³ It should be no real surprise then that college graduates are often unprepared to tackle the various writing tasks required of them in the workplace.

4. Increase productivity by streamlining employee writing projects. Often, management sees only the final product; they don't see, or aren't involved in, the planning, drafting, and revising of that final product; consequently, they may not understand the time staff waste when faced with a writing task, even one they're familiar with. It's not necessarily that the staff is lazy; on the contrary, many of them simply don't know where to begin because they haven't learned the tools they need to get started and to write productively. A recent survey supports this: "nearly 75 percent of people think that they could make better use of their writing time." If the staff isn't making good use of their writing time, in all likelihood, they're wasting not only their time but the company's time. Such waste directly affects a company's bottom line.⁴

Can Effective Writing be Taught?

What is certainly true is that workers, regardless of their skill level and/or education, can be taught techniques that will help them produce documents in less time and that require fewer revisions and less editing. These techniques should involve planning strategies, such as freewriting, brainstorming, and outlining, in addition to creating audience and purpose rubrics that help writers target the appropriate audience with the correct walk-away message. In addition, writers should be given practical techniques about how to use language to effectively get the point across; how to structure sentences, paragraphs, and documents to emphasize particular points; and how to ensure that every document presents a positive image of the company and the writer. If writers are given the tools they need to produce well-

² <http://diverseeducation.com/article/14627/>

³ <http://kairosnews.org/writing-skills-singled-out>

⁴ <http://write-better.blogspot.com/2010/02/professional-writing-skills-book-offers.html>

written documents, others will spend less time revising and rewriting; the result will be less wasted time, better use of valuable resources, and a workforce that's prepared to write documents that present a positive image of the organization.

What Should You Look for When Hiring a Company for Writing Training?

First, understand that just because there's someone in your organization who's a competent writer (this may even be the person who's burdened with editing everyone else's work!), that doesn't mean that that person necessarily understands how to teach writing or what's involved in teaching. In addition, we've found that oftentimes, when companies take the approach of using someone in-house, that no long-term solution results, as many workers are more likely to heed advice from an outside expert than someone they work with everyday and 2) the worker asked to provide the training doesn't really understand either how or what to teach and may feel resentment at being asked to tackle yet another job.

When outsourcing writing training, look for:

1. A company that's been in business for several years and that has worked with both well-known and lesser-known companies, both large and small. A company with this kind of experience has the knowledge and expertise to provide various kinds of long-term solutions.
2. A company that has repeat clients. If you're unsure, simply ask. A company should be able to provide several references from organizations that have hired them more than once.
3. A company that can provide a sampling of evaluations from the participants who've attended the workshops. A company that can't provide evaluations isn't worth working with.
4. A company whose workshops cover more than grammar and that delve into the "meat" of what makes writing effective. Research shows that a writing course based on grammar alone will not result in long-term change in your organization.
5. A company whose instructors have advanced degrees, preferably PhDs, and whose instructors have experience working in academic environments. To get the most in terms of experience and knowledge, those who've worked in academia understand what it means to teach and impart knowledge and how to build writing workshops and classes. They also have vast experience in creating courses, ensuring relevance, and working with diverse populations.
6. A company that asks you relevant questions about your firm and its writers. Don't accept a cookie-cutter proposal; ensure that vendor takes the time to figure out your needs and what it is that you're trying to accomplish with the writing training. Possible questions that a potential vendor should ask are
 - a. What kinds of documents does your staff write?
 - b. What are your staff's major writing issues?
 - c. Who's requesting the writing training (management or the staff themselves)?
 - d. What are your short- and long-term goals for the training?

Spend the necessary time to research your options in terms of potential training companies. After all, it's your time, money, and resources that will benefit!

About Hurley Write, Inc.

Hurley Write, Inc. is a full-service writing training company that has been serving clients in pharma, the government, engineering, and various other industries around the world for over 20 years (www.hurleywrite.com/clientlist.asp). Hurley Write, Inc. provides online and onsite courses in technical, business, and scientific writing. The courses we offer are customized to fit your organization's needs and focus on providing your staff the tools they need to produce effective documents that get the message across the first time. All of our instructors have advanced degrees; the founder, Pam Hurley, has a PhD in technical writing and has taught at Duke University, The George Washington University, and other institutions, both public and private, large and small. She works on an ongoing basis with UNC-Chapel Hill, the National Institutes of Health, and various other organizations. For more information or for a copy of her CV, contact us at info@hurleywrite.com.