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What Can't Public Relations Graduates Write?

**A study and evaluation of professional
writing skills lacked by public
relations graduates.**

**By
Ginger Buganski**

A Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree in the Graduate School
Of Rowan University
June 30, 2000

Approved by _____
Dr. Donald Bagin

Date Approved 6-30-2000

ABSTRACT

Ginger Buganski

What Can't Public Relations Graduates Write?

**A study and evaluation of professional writing skills
lacked by public relations graduates.**

2000

Dr. Don Bagin

Master's of Arts, Public Relations

Through a survey of roughly 50 public relations practitioners, this study identified specific writing skills public relations graduates lack and compiled recommendations for improving public relations education.

The author sent double post-cards to 100 public relations professionals nationwide. The post-cards asked for participation in a public relations writing questionnaire. At the same time, the author posted the questionnaire to two professional listservs (e-mail groups). A total of 46 professionals completed the questionnaire.

Nearly 90 percent of respondents ranked writing as one of the top three skills essential for public relations success. However, 70 percent of the professionals rated recent graduates' writing skills as between needing major improvement and acceptable. Respondents ranked graduates weakest in grammar, spelling, active voice and news style.

Overall, respondents thought educational institutions successfully meet the needs of the profession by providing a basic grounding in theory and practices. Respondents recommended internships, more practical writing exercises, and more focus on grammar and spelling as ways to improve.

With these research findings, the profession can hopefully improve the quality of writing emerging from our academic institutions.

MINI-ABSTRACT

Ginger Buganski

What Can't Public Relations Graduates Write?

**A study and evaluation of professional writing skills
lacked by public relations graduates.**

2000

Dr. Don Bagin

Master's of Arts, Public Relations

This study identified specific writing skills public relations graduates lack and recommended ways to improve public relations education.

Seventy percent of respondents consider recent graduates' writing skills barely acceptable. Respondents ranked graduates weakest in grammar, spelling, active voice and news style. Respondents recommended internships and more writing exercises as ways to improve public relations education.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To Dr. Don Bagin:

Thank you for your support and encouragement. You pushed me to strive for excellence and gave me confidence to take on any responsibility. I respect you and appreciate your respect for me.

To Jimmy Care:

Without your patience and love I would have suffered a breakdown months ago. You kept my spirits up, no matter how hectic life had gotten. Together, we worked through the frustration—always emerging with smiles. You have been my inspiration. I thank you with all my heart.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 Introduction and Statement of the Problem, page 1
Chapter 2 Literature Review, page 6
Chapter 3 Procedures, page 13
Chapter 4 Results, page 15
Chapter 5 Conclusions and Recommendations, page 31

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Good writing is essential in public relations. Practitioners must write news releases, annual reports, speeches, brochure copy and campaign plans.

Why then does there seem to be a great cry of despair among public relations professionals concerning the lack of basic writing skills in the industry's graduates?

What specific writing skills do recent public relations graduates lack? In which areas do they need to improve their writing ability and knowledge? What can public relations educators do to improve the situation?

THE NEED FOR STUDY

When asked, anyone in the public relations field would surely rank writing at the top of the list of skills necessary for success. According to Frank Grazian, a public relations author and educator, "extensive knowledge of the English language correlates with career success more than any other single characteristic researchers have identified."¹

In a 1997 article, Dennis Spring, president of a New York public relations firm, stated, "Writing is king. From the lowest levels to executive VP, you won't be taken seriously or get ahead without it."²

¹ Frank Grazian, "Who Really Cares About Grammar and Usage?," Public Relations Quarterly Fall 1997: 5.

² Dennis Spring, "Media Savvy, writing skills are PR's most sought after skills," O'Dwyer's PR Services Report May 1997: 65.

According to Christopher Dobens, a California-agency vice president, "The art of writing is fundamental to public relations. Unfortunately, it appears to be a lost art these days."³

Larry Kamer of Kamer-Singer & Associates, a San Francisco firm, reports, "High on the list of disappointments of public relations employers is the discovery that an otherwise presentable candidate can't write."⁴

In 1994 Jack Haberstroh, an associate professor in the School of Mass Communications, Virginia Commonwealth University, compiled a small volume of writing exercises from public relations professionals for use in college-level classes.⁵

Through his research he contacted the Public Relations Society of America's "Academy of Counselors." From the list of 938, 142 responded to Haberstroh's request for exercises. Most of the responses were accompanied by comments about writing and its importance in public relations.

All of the letters were from established public relations professionals with years of experience in evaluating applicants; and they all agreed on one point—"Public relations graduates can't write!" Some of the remarks included:

"If our experience is typical, writing is one of the very weakest areas of most new graduates. That's probably being kind... 'appalling' is what's really crossing my mind."—James E. Lukaszewski, Chairman, The Lukaszewski Group Inc.

³ Christopher Dobens, "The Lost Art of Writing in Public Relations," <<http://www.prsa.org/tacfiles/9904rpt.html>> (Accessed 12 Nov. 1999).

⁴ Edward H. Moore, Putting Power in PR Copy. (Prentice Hall, Rowan University Techniques in Communication Fall 1999 Class Handout. Excerpt from text) 1.

⁵ Jack Haberstroh, "PR Graduates Don't Measure Up as Writers: What the Pros Think and What You Can Do About It," Public Relations Quarterly Winter 1994-95: 22.

“The absolute number one complaint about college graduates seeking to enter the PR business is that they don’t know how to write.”—Al Croft, President, A.C. Croft and Associates.

“Writing, to me, is the most important element of public relations, yet it’s a major shortcoming of your practitioners today. This observation is echoed by peer friends and working journalists alike.”—Larry Litchfield, Executive Director, Association of Builders & Contractors of South Nevada.

“Anyone who expects to get ahead in public relations should take and MASTER English and logic. All too often, we interview people fresh out of college—and I’m talking honor graduates from the Ivy League as well as from state universities and colleges—who can neither write nor think clearly. We are not here to teach remedial English and remedial thinking; yet, that is what we end up doing.”—Paul Purdom, President, Purdom Public Relations.⁶

These complaints are not new to the industry. As far back as the early 1980s, the concern over declining writing skills existed. Public relations professional Don Bates asked in 1983, “ Why, then, a half a century or more since public relations came of age as an identifiable professional pursuit, when some 200 colleges and universities offer degrees and sequences in public relations, are so many practitioners such poor writers?”⁷

⁶ Haberstroh 23.

⁷ Don Bates, “Why practitioners must be good writers,” Public Relations Journal May 1983: 6.

In 1982, James A. Morrissey, APR, stated that “the greatest need, and unfortunately oftentimes the greatest deficiency, is in the area of writing skills.” He continued to say, “Most of what association communication professionals do requires the ability to express ideas in clear, concise, understandable written form.”⁸

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The study identified the specific writing skills that public relations graduates are lacking. Research yielded a list of common concerns of public relations professionals about entry-level writing skills. Based on the research findings, a list of recommendations for improving public relations education was developed. Public relations students, educators and professionals will all benefit from the research findings of this study.

According to Bates, “Improving the way we’re educated is a major step toward better public relations writing. Improving the way we now write is equally essential.”⁹

PROCEDURE

First, the author sent double-postcards to 100 public relations practitioners and educators across the nation. The postcards asked for participation in a questionnaire concerning public relations writing. If they were willing to participate, they mailed the other postcard back.

⁸ "Is Education Keeping Pace With Demands Of The Profession?," Public Relations Journal Feb. 1982: 21.

⁹ Bates 7.

Second, the author developed a questionnaire dealing with the current status of entry-level public relations writing skills. The questionnaire was sent to the responding practitioners.

At the same time, the author posted the questionnaire to two listservs (e-mail groups). These listservs comprised PPCOnline, available from PRSA's Professional Practice Center, and PRQuorum, an online forum for the public and media relations industry.

Third, the data from the questionnaires were compiled and analyzed to create a comprehensive list of writing skills frequently underdeveloped in public relations graduates.

Fourth, based on these findings, the author recommended improvements colleges and universities can make to improve the skills of public relations students.

LIMITATIONS

The results of this study were limited by the cooperation from public relations professionals in completing the survey. The study also focused on writing skills only. The practitioners and educators surveyed for this study were primarily located in the United States with some input from Canadians. Participation was voluntary and the sample was not randomly chosen; therefore the results may not be generalized to the entire population.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The author used several sources to retrieve literature pertaining to the importance of writing to public relations and the lack of necessary skills in practitioners. Online databases such as ERIC, ABI Inform, Web Spirs, Lexis-Nexis, Proquest and VALE were searched, using the keywords public relations and writing. The Internet search engine Northernlight.com was also used to locate relevant information.

These searches yielded countless references, all of which the author examined and reduced to the information discussed in this chapter.

The author also contacted the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) for relevant information. PRSA sent thirteen articles, and the IABC had no information to share.

This thesis focused on public relations writing skills. Three major areas arose from this subject: the importance of writing skills to the practice of public relations; the apparent deteriorating skill-level of current public relations graduates; and the current status of public relations education, in the opinions of public relations practitioners.

Importance of Writing Skills

In numerous surveys and studies public relations practitioners have identified writing as the most important skill looked for in entry-level employees. A 1978 Public Relations Journal survey report dealing with what employers want from entry-level candidates found, "writing is the single most important skill in public relations,

employers say. It is involved in every public relations function and every prospective employer looks at it first."¹⁰

Public Relations Journal also surveyed roughly 350 practitioners in 1992 and found that "writing skills were endorsed overwhelmingly by practitioners as most important for a public relations career--86% rated writing skills as one of four subjects of top importance."¹¹

In 1999 the Commission on Public Relations Education released a "Port of Entry" Report at the Public Relations Society of America's International Conference. The Commission sent surveys to 1312 public relations educators and practitioners and yielded a 20 percent response rate. The Commission asked the respondents to rate 24 desirable skills/attitudes for entry-level employees on a seven-point scale. "Practitioners and academics generally agreed...the most highly desired skill was writing news releases (practitioner mean=6.47, educator mean=6.77, with 7 being 'highly desirable')."¹²

The prominence of writing skills can also be found by perusing the help-wanted ads. According to Spring "a quick tour of the classifieds tells what you need to get started today: strong writing skills, media savvy, self-motivation, good communication skills, ability to play on a team, generalist."¹³

¹⁰ "The Employers: What Do They Really Want?" Public Relations Journal July 1978: 13.

¹¹ Donald F. Schwartz, J. Paul Yarbrough and M. Therese Shakra, "Does Public Relations Education Make the Grade?," Public Relations Journal Sep. 1992: 18.

¹² Commission on Public Relations Education, "Public Relation Education for the 21st Century: A Port of Entry Report," Oct. 1999 <<http://www.prsa.org/prssa4.html>> (Accessed 3 Jan. 2000).

¹³ Spring 65.

The author performed her own content analysis of help-wanted ads from the Philadelphia Inquirer and the New York Times and found that half of the ads mentioned writing skills as a requirement. The author examined a sample of 45 help-wanted ads from the papers' Sunday editions from Oct. 31, 1999, through Nov. 21, 1999.

Gene Grabowski, a Washington, D.C., media relations director, summarizes this section in saying, "Writing is perhaps the most valuable and universally applied public relations skill. PR professionals who can produce well written letters to plant story ideas or win accounts, or who can craft first-rate op-ed pieces or quotable official statements have a clear advantage over those who cannot."¹⁴

Apparent Deterioration of Writing Skills

According to the Commission on Public Relations Education 1999 Port of Entry report, "the future is indeed bright for the field of public relations. But there is one major qualification--having enough trained people to meet the expanding demand for public relations services and counsel. In fact, one expert observer of the field has called this 'public relations' next crisis'."¹⁵

In 1991 Martin Wank, president of his own firm, said "agencies and companies seeking writers face an almost insurmountable challenge these days. What goes by the name of writer is usually a dreaming wanderer lost in a maze of meaningless words."¹⁶ According to Wank, "supposed writers" do not understand the structure necessary in

¹⁴ Gene Grabowski, "The Seven Deadly Sins of Media Relations," Public Relations Quarterly Spring 1992: 37.

¹⁵ Commission of Public Relations Education online.

¹⁶ Martin Wank, "Wanted: Writers who can at least write," Advertising Age 18 Feb. 1991: 25.

any piece of writing. He observes that they may have been taught theories such as the inverted pyramid, but they never learned anything about internal structure.¹⁷

Christopher Dobens, vice president of a public relations firm, also laments the decline in writing skills, "The growing shortage of good writers in public relations is a complex problem, which may prove...damaging to our profession."¹⁸

When Jack Haberstroh surveyed members of the PRSA's "Academy of Counselors" concerning this issue in 1994, he found that they "unanimously agree that the writing skills of college graduates are deteriorating rapidly."¹⁹ One of his respondents said, "Most college students—PR majors or otherwise—I've seen in recent years, can't write coherently or persuasively, much less creatively. Yet, these skills are essential to success in PR." ²⁰

In his 1983 article, Don Bates enumerates some common complaints about public relations writing: "weak construction, verbosity, poor grammar, poor spelling, sloppy punctuation, distorted syntax, lack of feeling, lack of vigor."²¹ Bates lists other "consistent infractions," including not addressing the audience, writing to be seen rather than to be read, focusing on the how and failing to explain the why.²²

¹⁷ Wank 25.

¹⁸ Dobens online.

¹⁹ Haberstroh 24.

²⁰ Haberstroh 23.

²¹ Bates 6.

²² Bates 6.

A more recent article by educators Schlagheck and Hendrix supports Bates' position. They quote an article by Ward and Seifert that states "more and more mass media students are writing with imprecision, poor grammar, bad subject-verb agreement, passive verbs, haphazard punctuation, gruesome style, and even lousy spelling."²³

The purpose of this thesis is to identify specific weaknesses in recent public relations graduates' writing skills. Based on her findings, the author will recommend improvements public relations educators can make to alleviate these shortcomings.

But how do public relations professionals rate the current status of public relations education? Does it adequately meet the needs of the profession?

Public Relations Education

In 1976, public relations counselor Thomas Kuby surveyed 100 practitioners picked at random from the *Public Relations Register*. More than half of his respondents felt that colleges and universities "were not adequately preparing students for the 'real world'."²⁴

Don Bates' 1983 article addressed the issue of public relations writing. He attributed the deterioration of writing skills partially to the education curriculum of academic institutions, which emphasized journalistic writing. Bates suggested that "improving the way we're educated is a major step toward better public relations writing."²⁵

²³ Carol Schlagheck and Lolita Hendrix, "How to build basic writing skills within the public relations course," *Public Relations Quarterly* Fall 1996: 25.

²⁴ "The Employers..." 11.

²⁵ Bates 7.

He did observe, however, that colleges and universities were "acknowledging the fact that journalistic training doesn't sufficiently prepare public relations practitioners for on-the-job writing."²⁶

A 1992 Public Relations Journal survey of 320 public relations practitioners and 34 chief executives found that nearly two-thirds of respondents felt that public relations undergraduate degrees adequately prepared students for entry-level jobs. Relevant, yet somewhat contradictory findings include:

1. One-third of those responding thought that public relations students were "cheated by the low quality of education in public relations programs."
2. Fifty-two percent of the respondents were unsure of the quality of public relations education.
3. Sixty percent of those responding were unsure whether public relations educators keep up with current trends in the profession, and 19 percent think they don't.
4. Despite all of this, 60 percent of responding practitioners agreed that "as the public relations profession becomes more established and appreciated, so will public relations education."²⁷

These statistics have improved slightly between 1992 and 1999. The "Port of Entry" report of the Commission on Public Relations Education surveyed public relations practitioners and educators. Pertinent findings include:

1. Practitioners and educators strongly agree that education is "on track."
2. Less than 20 percent of educators and less than 15 percent of practitioners disagree the "PR education is keeping up with current trends in the profession."

²⁶ Bates 6.

²⁷ Schwartz, Yarbrough and Shakra 18.

3. Only 18.1 percent of practitioners disagreed or strongly disagreed that "Most PR practitioners have a very positive attitude toward PR college graduates;" 20.8 percent of educators disagreed.
4. Practitioners and academics agree that they are not satisfied that desirable skills/knowledge are actually found in graduates, with only three of these skills—good attitude, word processing/e-mail, and typing skill—scoring above 5 on the 7-point scale.²⁸

The Commission on Public Relations Education made seven recommendations for "interaction between public relations education and the professional practice of public relations." Two were relevant to this thesis:

1. Public relations practitioners should take a new look at the "products" of today's public relations education, for they are likely to be impressed with the breadth and depth of knowledge and skill students bring to internships and entry-level employment.
2. There is a great need for significantly increased support from practitioners for accreditation/ certification of public relations programs."²⁹

Summary

This research highlighted the discrepancy between the importance of writing in public relations and the actual level of proficiency of those entering the field from academia. How can we reconcile this difference and improve the quality of writing emerging from our academic institutions? This thesis identified the specific writing areas in which graduates are the weakest and offered possible improvements to the public relations education provided by colleges and universities.

²⁸ Commission on Public Relations Education online.

²⁹ Commission on Public Relations Education online.

CHAPTER 3

PROCEDURES

First, the author searched the databases at the Rowan University Library, Glassboro, N.J., using Web Spirs, ABI Inform and Lexis-Nexis. She also searched the Internet for current, relevant literature through Northernlight.com. The keywords used to locate information were public relations, writing and skills. The author also requested information from the Public Relations Society of America and the International Association of Business Communicators.

Second, the author used the *Public Relations Society of America 1998 Bluebook* to choose 100 practitioners and educators to survey. The author chose representatives from every state so that the findings would not be geographically limited. She also tried to choose representatives from various fields within public relations. Because selection was based on specific quotas and participation was voluntary, the survey findings may not be generalized to the entire population.

Third, the author designed and mailed a double-postcard to 100 Public Relations Society of America members across the nation. (A copy of the post-cards can be found in **Appendix A** at the end of this thesis.) The postcard requested their participation in completing a questionnaire dealing with the current status of entry-level public relations writing skills. The postcard described the study and the time commitment involved, and offered to send an abstract of the findings. If the PRSA members were willing to participate, they sent back the self-addressed, stamped postcard. Thirty PRSA members responded positively.

Fourth, questionnaires were sent to those PRSA members that responded to the postcard. (A copy of the letter and questionnaire can be found in **Appendix B** at the end of this thesis.) After three weeks, a follow-up note was sent as a reminder. (A copy can be found in **Appendix C**.) After an additional three weeks, a follow-up e-mail was sent to those who had still not responded. (A copy can be found in **Appendix D**.) Twenty-six of the initial 30 PRSA members completed the questionnaire, resulting in a 26 percent response rate for the 100 originally mailed postcards.

At the same time, the author posted the questionnaire to two listservs (e-mail groups). These listservs comprised PPCOnline, available from PRSA's Professional Practice Center, and PRQuorum, an online forum for the public and media relations industry. Twenty professionals completed the online questionnaire.

Fifth, the data from the 46 mail and online questionnaires were compiled to create a comprehensive list of writing skills frequently underdeveloped in public relations graduates.

Sixth, based on the data received from the questionnaires, the author recommended improvements colleges and universities can make to improve the quality of writers graduating from their public relations programs.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The questionnaire used for this study comprised seven questions. Six of the questions were open-ended and the other was a Likert scale. The author designed the questions as open-ended to elicit unbiased results

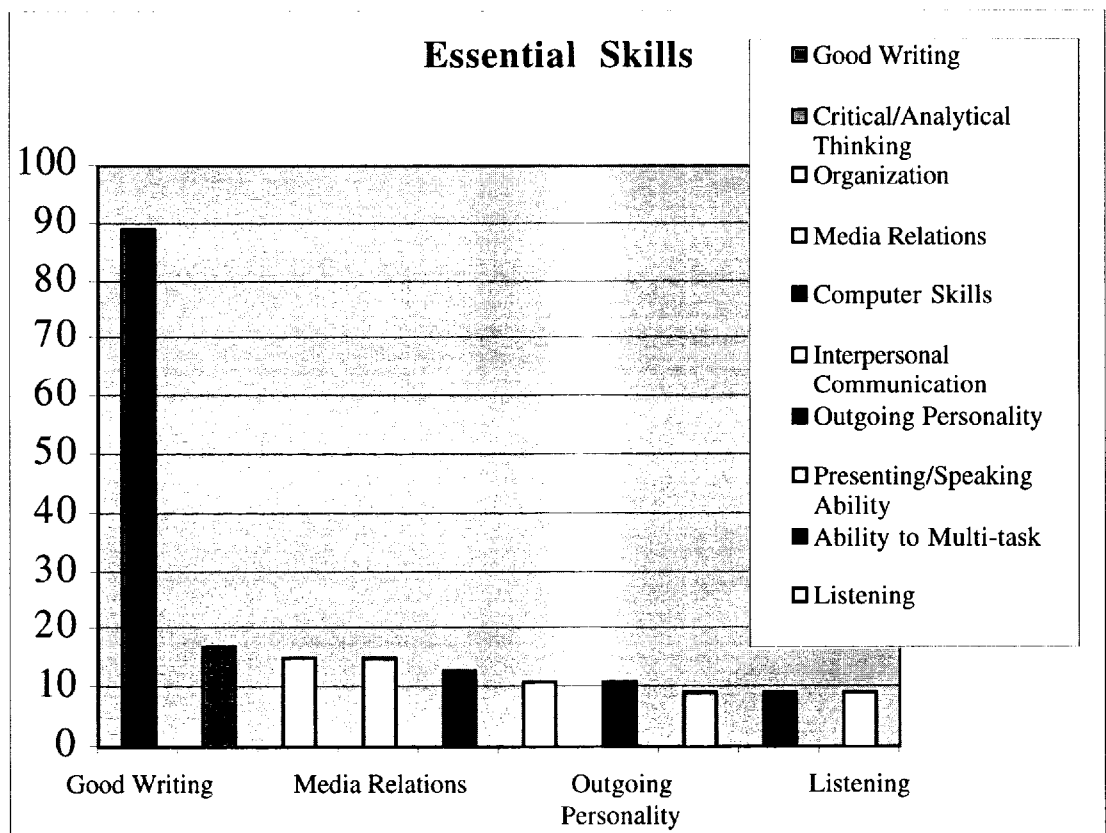
Question 1: What are the top three skills you consider essential for an entry-level public relations candidate?

This question was asked to determine the extent to which public relations professionals value writing skills. Based on the author's review of the existing literature, she learned that traditionally professionals consider writing essential to public relations success. This question was designed to determine if this held true in the industry today.

The ten skills listed in the "top three list" of essential skills are as follows:

1. Good Writing	89 percent of the total respondents
2. Critical/ Analytical thinker	17 percent
3. Organization	15 percent
4. Media Relations	15 percent
5. Computer Skills	13 percent
6. Interpersonal Communication	11 percent
7. Outgoing Personality/ Energetic	11 percent
8. Presenting/Speaking Skills	9 percent
9. Ability to multi-task	9 percent
10. Listening	9 percent

Writing skills far exceeded all other skills or traits considered essential for an entry-level public relations candidate. Four of the ten skills (analytical thinking, organization, outgoing personality, and listening) classify as personality traits. Another four (writing, media relations, interpersonal communication and presenting/speaking ability) are skills that are incorporated in most public relations educational programs. Many programs also require computer skills. The ability to multi-task is an ability that is learned through practical experience only.



Question 1

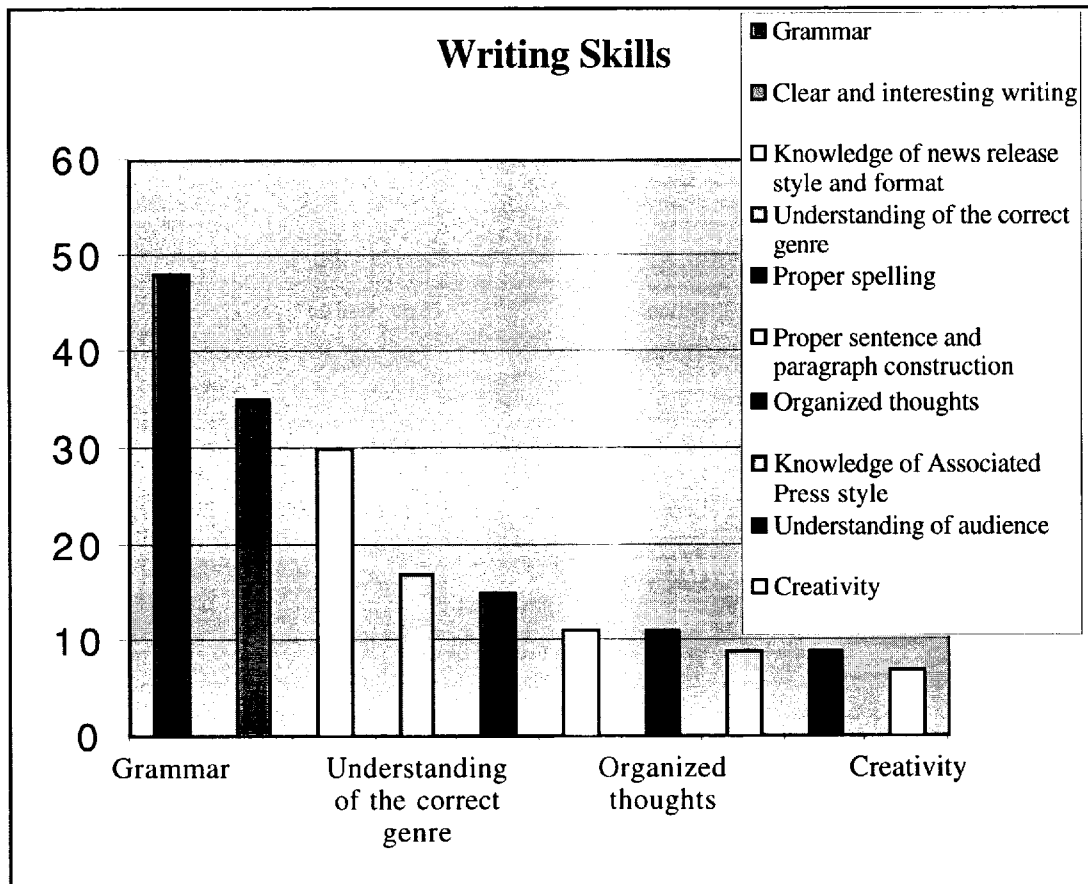
Skills	Online	Mail	Total	% of Total
<u>Communication Skills</u>	1	0	1	2
Good Writing	18	23	41	89
Oral Comm.	1	4	5	11
Interpersonal Comm.	2	2	4	9
Presenting/Speaking Skills	1	1	2	4
Good Grammar	1	0	1	2
Good Spelling	1	0	1	2
Write news advisory	0	1	1	2
News writing ability	0	1	1	2
<u>Media Relations</u>	2	5	7	15
Interviewing	1	1	2	4
<u>Abilities</u>				
Computer Skills	3	3	6	13
Research	1	1	2	4
Project Management	1	0	1	2
Gather accurate info.	1	0	1	2
Understanding of Integrated Comm	0	1	1	2
<u>Personality Traits</u>				
Critical/analytical thinker	4	4	8	17
Organization	4	3	7	15
Outgoing/Energetic	3	2	5	11
Listening	1	3	4	9
Ability to multi-task	3	1	4	9
Instinctive/ Think on feet	3	0	3	7
Quick learner	2	1	3	7
Knowledge of field	0	3	3	7
Teamworker	1	1	2	4
Good work ethic	1	1	2	4
Write for various publics	0	2	2	4
Attention to detail	0	2	2	4
Self-direction	1	0	1	2
Flexible	1	0	1	2
Curiosity	0	1	1	2
Planning	0	1	1	2
Familiar w/ basic legal concepts	0	1	1	2
Understanding of Co.'s Mission	0	1	1	2
General Intelligence	0	1	1	2
Awareness of current issues	0	1	1	2
Problem Solving	0	1	1	2

Question 2: What specific writing skills do you look for in entry-level public relations personnel?

The author designed question two to identify the specific writing tasks and skills professionals look for in entry-level candidates.

The ten skills listed most frequently by the practitioners surveyed are as follows:

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Grammar | 48 percent of total respondents |
| 2. Clear, concise and interesting writing | 35 percent |
| 3. Knowledge of news release style & format | 30 percent |
| 4. Understanding of the correct genre | 17 percent |
| 5. Good spelling | 15 percent |
| 6. Good sentence and paragraph construction | 11 percent |
| 7. Organized thoughts | 11 percent |
| 8. Knowledge of Associated Press style | 9 percent |
| 9. Understanding of audience | 9 percent |
| 10. Creativity | 7 percent |



Question 2

Skills	Online	Mail	Total	% of Total
Basics				
Grammar	8	14	22	48
News style/format	0	14	14	30
Spelling	2	5	7	15
Sentence/Paragraph structure	1	4	5	11
Organized thoughts	1	4	5	11
AP Style	1	3	4	9
Punctuation	1	1	2	4
Good vocabulary	1	1	2	4
Avoid redundancies & cliches	1	0	1	2
Traits				
Problem analysis	1	0	1	2
Teamworking/collaborating	1	0	1	2
Cultural literacy	1	0	1	2
Knowledge of current events	1	0	1	2
Legible handwriting	1	0	1	2
Love of words	1	0	1	2
Diction	1	0	1	2
Content				
Clear, concise, interesting	8	8	16	35
Understand correct genre	1	7	8	17
Understanding of audience	2	2	4	9
Creative	1	2	3	7
Proofreading/Editing	0	2	2	4
Newsworthiness	1	1	2	4
Story development	1	0	1	2
Accuracy	1	0	1	2
Vivid/colorful features	1	0	1	2
Ability to simplify complex issues	0	1	1	2
Interviewing Skills	0	1	1	2
Persuasive Writing	0	1	1	2

Question 3: How would you rate the writing skills of most recent public relations graduates?

This Likert scale question offered respondents choices ranging from unacceptable to professional quality. The choices were as follows:

- 1= unacceptable
- 2= need major improvement
- 3= acceptable
- 4= need minor improvement
- 5= professional quality

Most respondents rated recent public relations graduates' writing skills as acceptable (41 percent of total respondents). Seventy percent of practitioners surveyed felt that the writing skills were between needing major improvement and acceptable. Nearly one quarter of respondents rated the writing skills as needing major improvement. This reinforces the literature review findings that although professionals believe writing is essential to public relations success, the skills of the industry's recent graduates barely meet minimum expectations.

Question 3

Skill Rating	Online	Mail	Total	% of Total
1-unacceptable	2	1	3	7
2- need major improvement	2	8	10	22
2.5	1	2	3	7
3-acceptable	8	11	19	41
3.5	0	1	1	2
4-need minor improvement	4	1	5	11
5-professional quality	0	0	0	0
No Response	3	2	5	11

Question 4: In which specific areas are public relations graduates the weakest in terms of writing skills?

This question moves the study from reaffirming previous findings towards determining specifically where writing problems exist. By identifying the particular areas of weakness, academic institutions can address these issues directly. Professionals identified the following five skills as the weakest:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. Poor grammar | 65 percent of total respondents |
| 2. Failure to use active voice | 39 percent |
| 3. Poor spelling | 39 percent |
| 4. Don't use or know news style | 30 percent |
| 5. Write a good, formatted release | 15 percent |

Question 4

Skills	Online	Mail	Total	% of Total
Poor Grammar	10	20	30	65
Failure to use active voice	7	11	18	39
Poor Spelling	6	12	18	39
Don't use/know news style	4	10	14	30
Write a good, formatted release	2	5	7	15
Sentence and Paragraph construction	3	2	5	11
Poor editing skills	1	3	4	9
Poor Punctuation	1	1	2	4
Organization	2	0	2	4
Too long	0	2	2	4
Lack of understanding of audience	0	2	2	4
Creativity	1	1	2	4
Appropriate style	1	1	2	4
Neat/clean standard Appearance	1	0	1	2
Tone	1	0	1	2
Too much use of slang	1	0	1	2
Ability to write persuasively	1	0	1	2
Ability to get facts	1	0	1	2
Boring	0	1	1	2
Leads	0	1	1	2
Attention to detail	0	1	1	2
Accuracy	0	1	1	2
Vocabulary	0	1	1	2

Question 5: What are the three most common specific writing weaknesses you see in public relations graduates?

The author asked this question to determine very specific mechanical or structural problems in recent public relations graduates' writing. These problems could include subject and verb agreement, dangling modifiers or comma placement. However, the wording of the question was not clear to most respondents, and they answered this question very similarly to question 4. Therefore, the author did not receive the information she had hoped to by asking this question.

The five skills listed in the "top three list" of writing weaknesses include the following:

1. Poor grammar	48 percent of total respondents
2. Use of passive voice	28 percent
3. Not writing in news style	17 percent
4. Poor spelling	17 percent
5. Poor sentence and paragraph construction	17 percent

In question two concerning the specific writing skills sought in entry-level public relations personnel, 48 percent of the practitioners responded with good grammar. That same percentage listed poor grammar as one of the top three most common writing weaknesses found in recent public relations graduates.

Question 5

Skills	Online	Mail	Total	% of Total
Poor grammar	8	14	22	48
Use of dangling modifiers	1	1	2	4
Noun-verb disagreement	0	2	2	4
Noun-pronoun disagreement	0	2	2	4
Lack of transitions	0	1	1	2
Too many dependant clauses	0	1	1	2
Use of passive voice	5	8	13	28
Not writing in news style	2	6	8	17
Poor spelling	3	5	8	17
Poor sentence/paragraph construction (Fragments, run-on)	3	5	8	17
Not concise, too wordy	4	3	7	15
Not familiar with format	2	3	5	11
Boring	1	3	4	9
Not familiar with writing styles	2	1	3	7
Too much fluff, not enough meat	1	2	3	7
Inability to find newsworthiness	1	2	3	7
Poorly written leads	1	1	2	4
Redundancy	1	1	2	4
Poor punctuation	2	0	2	4
Lack of self-editing	0	2	2	4
Inability to develop stories to conclusions	1	0	1	2
Not willing to ask for help	1	0	1	2
Not thorough	1	0	1	2
Lack of technical writing skills	1	0	1	2
Lack of understanding of writing process	1	0	1	2
Framing of issues	1	0	1	2
Convincingly communicating thru writing	1	0	1	2
Interpersonal communication	1	0	1	2
Work ethic	1	0	1	2
Word Choice	0	1	1	2
Lack of respect for language	0	1	1	2
Don't understand business	0	1	1	2
Poor organization	0	1	1	2
No personal style	0	1	1	2
Attention to detail	0	1	1	2
Take too long to write	0	1	1	2
Transitions	0	1	1	2
Unclear	0	1	1	2
Persuasive writing	0	1	1	2
Identifying the purpose	0	1	1	2

Question 6: What, if anything, would you suggest educational institutions do to improve the quality of public relations graduates' writing skills?

The five previous questions allowed respondents to identify the weaknesses in public relations graduates' writing skills. This question let respondents propose solutions to improve writing quality. The most mentioned improvement was internships. Several respondents suggested more internships as a way for public relations students to hone their writing skills. Respondents also recommended more practical writing exercises, more focus on grammar and spelling, and tougher grading on assignments.

The complete list of responses is below.

Mail Responses:

1. Make them write more. Commit to a style guide. Forbid them to use spell-check and learn how to proof and edit copy. Grade them on grammar, spelling and punctuation in everything they turn in.
2. Give a priority to writing.
3. Remedial writing across the curriculum (not popular with administrators) but high schools are doing a poor job.
4. They must have news writing, not PR writing.
5. More internships. Give them more writing assignments in class.
6. You learn to write by writing. Colleges should make writing part of all four years, start with how to write a lead and a one-page news release and work your way up to features.
7. More internships to show how real PR writing is done.
8. Write, write, write.
9. More writing courses.
10. More internships and co-op programs.
11. Have news writing courses and internships.

12. Require writing across the curriculum. Require grammar classes as part of general education courses.
13. Add coursework that reinforces the basics of writing—not necessarily attached to PR communications.
14. Require business-writing courses.
15. Provide more writing exercises. Demand more "outside" writing (school paper, internships)
16. Make them write all the time and be demanding about quality, accuracy, speed, attention to detail, voice, etc.
17. On-the-job training and more on-the-job training. Have adjuncts grade papers, etc.
18. More frequent short writing exercises.
19. Be tougher. Set higher standards. Require more writing classes. Teach students to use the AP stylebook. I think they are failing their students in almost every way. The graduates are not prepared to succeed.
20. Have students read more diverse styles, encourage students to keep journals, challenge them to stretch—get outside their own comfort level
21. Hire PR professionals who know how to write instead of Ph.D. professionals with minimal experience who reinforce bad writing habits.
22. Teach the basics before college.
23. Learn to ask why, learn to edit, learn to translate message for public, teach reporting skills and how to use in various situations and settings, understand the informational needs of the news media.
24. Teach students to become better editors. They seemed to be too rushed and rely on too many others to edit their work. They need to develop skills at self-editing. Teach students about persuasive public relations writing—not just news writing. Few students understand the elements of writing a persuasive speech or writing a campaign brochure or writing an issue paper. All of these fall under the discipline of public relations, too. It's more than writing a news release!
25. I think most of it starts even before college. Well before college actually. I'd make internships mandatory, a full semester, and give them a full semester credit.

Online Responses:

1. More contact with actual field professionals and less emphasis on classwork. More in-depth problem solving. More emphasis on speaking skills.
2. Get these kids some internships, dammit!!
3. Provide opportunities for students to get in the habit of reading good writing.
4. Give students more opportunities to write releases. Encourage internships. Have professors become more accessible to students.
5. Make them write every day! Make it mandatory they write for the campus newspaper, for example.
6. More practical writing exercise, including teaching how to research for the news story.
7. Grammar review courses.
8. Provide more grammar and usage courses in conjunction with PR, news, and feature writing courses. Teach cultural literacy and the importance of keeping up with current events. This adds to the writer awareness of issues and how they affect an organization.
9. Send it back if it isn't done perfectly! Too often, educators seem to mark errors and reduce the grade, but they never actually ask the student to re-do the work correctly. It is in doing that we learn best. I've also observed that late papers seem to be acceptable in many classrooms. I can't afford to have client work come in behind schedule, so the object lesson here is an important one.
10. All students should be required to take a feature-writing class, as well as a news-writing class, so that they understand what it is reporters are looking for. They also should be encouraged to take a creative writing class to get a better understanding of the fundamentals, such as grammar and punctuation.
11. As I mentioned, our program instituted a writing test. This is the first year so it's still early, but judging by the quality of the written assignments this year, I think it was a good move.
12. Better understanding of the writing process and where it fits within the field of public relations. Recent graduates seem unable to write to count [with a true purpose other than class assignment] or to take criticism of their writing. They need to understand that writing is a process in public relations and that it is usually a team effort. Rarely are we afforded the ownership that one would get with a novel.

13. Be tougher in grading -- no one should get above a "C" in any PR course without being a good writer
14. I would make P.R. majors take at least 18 credits of English so that their writing skills are just as solid as their P.R. skills.
15. Focus on the crucial importance of grammar and spelling; active vs. passive voice; plus news-style writing.
16. Teach writing and make assignments that require students to practice it. Required reading. Required internships. Required Speech (public speaking). Mastery in spelling and grammar before graduation.
17. Practice, scrutiny, review professional writing, test effectiveness with students in other disciplines (test market)
18. Write for non-academic readers
19. Have MUCH more practical writing. I've seen several PR school curricula and they emphasize news releases, publicity avenues, etc. I'm from a J-school tradition and have found the people with solid writing backgrounds have much more success working with editors, editing publications and writing news releases. I can't tell you how many job candidates swore to me they could write - true, but most didn't write very well. I wouldn't want to read their stuff on a regular basis and I certainly wouldn't want to have to edit (babysit) their writing attempts.
20. Where I think we fall down most often is the strategic aspect of communications and PR. We tend to focus on the tactical. Perhaps that's not inappropriate as most entry level PR people tend to work in a more tactical environment - moving to the more strategic as they gain experience and move up in the ranks.

Question 7: In which areas do you think educational institutions are successfully meeting the needs of the profession?

The author included this question to avoid an entirely negative assessment of academic institutions. The most common success of the academic institutions was in providing a general understanding of the profession.

All the respondents' comments appear below.

Mail:

1. Internships (3)
2. Good basis for ethics and values (2)
3. Research (2)
4. PR writing courses (2)
5. Technology (2)
6. Case analysis
7. Confidence
8. Orientation to the profession—the culture of PR
9. Providing networking opportunities with prospective employers
10. Hiring excellent instructors
11. Providing and encouraging a liberal arts education
12. Expand computer and online skills
13. Providing plenty of potential employees
14. Providing a solid overview of the industry and giving student the basic skills
15. General conceptual grasp of field

16. I think they are doing a good job of showing that PR is a management function that contributes to the overall health of the company.
17. Most programs I know about provide good opportunities in principles and concepts (including ethics), case studies and projects. Writing opportunities appear to vary, and I doubt that we will ever provide enough to satisfy everyone.
18. Philosophy and ethics
19. Broad tactical exposure.
20. Institutions are turning out logical thinkers who can perform multiple tasks.
21. Good review of crisis case studies; discussion of theoretical PR strategies; overview of PR practices.
22. News and feature story writing.

Online:

1. They do provide a basic grounding in theory and history as well as an above-average emphasis on research.
2. Theory and the importance of communications in an organization
3. General preparation, i.e. a broad understanding of the basics and the different areas of focus in the profession (marketing communications, event planning, fundraising, media relations, etc.)
4. Providing a general understanding of the profession
5. Providing career-oriented graduates with fundamental skills
6. Theory and in educating on overall framework and workings of business
7. Liberal arts education is good because it gets the student a taste of everything that could be thrown at them. Writing, reading, projects, etc.
8. Not sure -- I prefer to hire liberal arts graduates. I find they are better at clear thinking and synthesizing.
9. Ability and willingness to work long hours, aggressiveness and tenaciousness
10. I can only speak to Rowan, which does an excellent job of providing direct, hands-on experience more than broad theory.

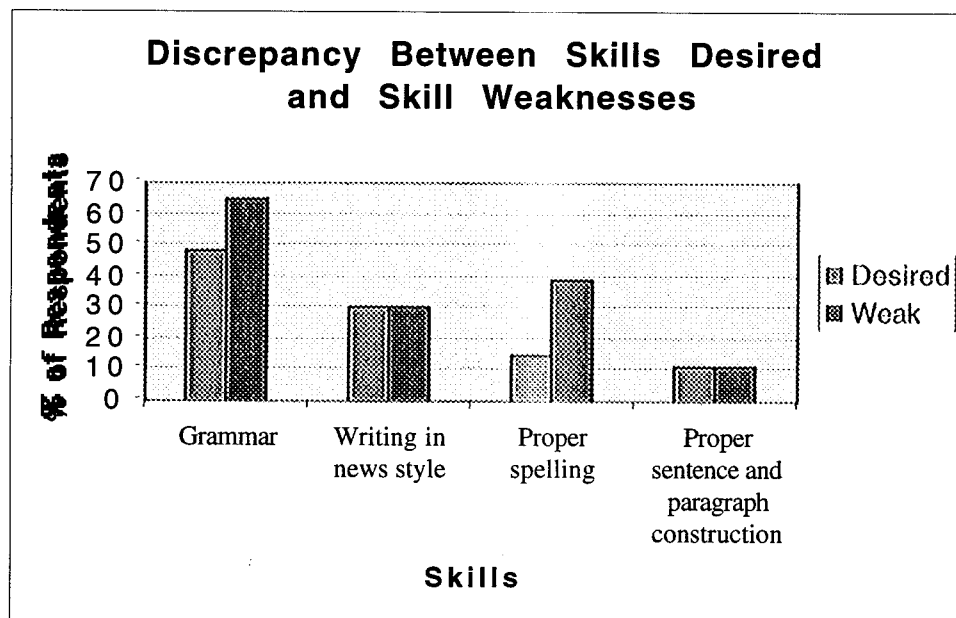
11. Career exploration, internships and mentorships are now a strong component of many programs, which means that applicants are knowledgeable about tasks and working conditions before they come into my office. I am also pleased to see more courses on ethics being incorporated in the curriculum!
12. I think that schools are doing a great job of making students take internships early in their college years so that they experience the work world and have a chance to really see what careers are out there in their field.
13. Detailing what nonprofits do (grassroots-type PR campaigns). Teaching students the fundamentals on event planning. Distinguishing the difference between PR, advertising, and marketing.
14. Don't know about all educational institutions, but mine (Cal State Fullerton) had an intensive public relations writing class, which was primarily focused on writing press releases--format, AP style, the five Ws, etc. But it should be more than one semester.
15. When students stop coming out of public relations programs saying, "I'm in PR because I like people," we'll know they're getting a decent PR education.
16. Perhaps, analytical thinking, but this one's difficult to answer.
17. Publication skills
18. Encouraging students to take an active role in their own education. Giving them the tools necessary to achieve industry standards.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study confirm the literature review findings. While 89 percent of survey respondents consider good writing essential to work in public relations, 70 percent rated the writing skills of recent public relations graduates as between needing improvement and acceptable. This demonstrates that the state of writing in the public relations industry has not improved in recent years, despite the growing number of institutions that offer public relations programs and degrees.

Interestingly, four of the skills considered essential to public relations success also emerged as areas in which recent public relations graduates demonstrate the least proficiency (questions two and four). These skills were good grammar, knowledge of news style and release format, good spelling and proper sentence and paragraph construction. The following graph illustrates these findings.



Sadly, three of the five skills listed in the "top three list" of writing weaknesses were the basic writing principles of grammar, spelling, and sentence and paragraph construction. The other two, news style and overuse of passive voice, are essential public relations writing skills.

Conclusions

Based on the review of existing literature and the results of the questionnaire, the author has concluded the following:

1. Public relations students are not receiving the proper training in basic writing elements such as grammar and spelling. Colleges and universities assume that this instruction has taken place at previous levels of education.
2. Public relations students do not understand and/or use appropriate public relations writing style such as active voice and correct news style.
3. Public relations students do not receive enough professional training in writing (i.e. self-editing, targeting audiences, persuasive writing)

Recommendations

After reviewing the questionnaire results and the suggestions offered by respondents, the author recommends the following:

Public relations programs should require at least one course on fundamental writing skills such as grammar, spelling, and sentence and paragraph construction.

If a course is not integrated within general education requirements or major-related courses, programs should test students' abilities in these areas as a prerequisite for admission or as a graduation requirement. Although these skills should have been mastered prior to college, public relations students *must* master these skills prior to graduation.

Public relations programs should emphasize journalistic writing and public relations-specific writing within the curriculum. In those institutions where these skills are already emphasized, stricter grading policies must be enforced to ensure proficiency.

The survey findings demonstrate that public relations graduates are not sufficiently proficient in writing in the industry standard style. Although there is a difference between journalistic writing and public relations writing, students must learn how to write publishable news releases and feature articles in addition to brochure and newsletter copy. Students should be familiar with the needs of the various media.

Public relations programs must require more practical writing experience, including internships and courses geared towards specific writing genres.

Many survey respondents suggested more practical writing exercises. They commented that although students might understand the theories or concepts behind the writing, the students were unable to translate the knowledge into tangible written pieces. Respondents suggested requiring more outside writing assignments such as journals and articles for the school paper.

Internships would give students first-hand experience working in the deadline-driven office environment. Outside of the classroom they would develop better self-editing skills and become accustomed to collaborative writing with an office staff. This experience might help prepare them for the unforgiving pace and the error-free demands of the industry. They will possibly be exposed to a greater variety of writing styles and learn to write for a variety of audiences and purposes.

Recommendations for Further Study

Due to time and financial restraints, the author was limited to a sample size of 100 people and only one follow-up mailing. A larger, randomly-selected sample would provide more statistically accurate results, which then could be generalized to the larger population.

A coordinating study and examination of the current curriculum of public relations programs nationally would also benefit this study. This could identify the areas most programs emphasize. These findings would help identify the skill areas that are most commonly ignored within public relations programs.

The author also recommends a longitudinal study involving "before and after" testing. A study that tested public relations students' proficiency before implementation of a new curriculum and again after could prove the effectiveness of the changes.

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Dear PRSA Member,

My public relations master's thesis explores the current status of entry-level candidates' writing skills.

According to my research, public relations professionals are generally disappointed with recent college graduates' writing proficiency.

I hope to pinpoint the most underdeveloped skill areas and create a list of recommendations for improving public relations education.

I need your help in completing a brief questionnaire dealing with this issue. The questionnaire contains fewer than 10 questions and should take less than 15 minutes to complete.

Please return the attached self-addressed, stamped postcard with your response. I will be happy to send you an abstract of my findings.

Gratefully,

Ginger Buganski, Rowan University
Dr. Don Bagin, Thesis Advisor

P. S. If you do not have direct contact with entry-level candidates, please pass this on to someone who does.

Ginger Buganski
275 E. High Street
Apt. O-291
Glassboro, NJ 08028

**Thank You
for Your Cooperation**

Please check the appropriate box and return this card to participate in Ginger Buganski's graduate study.

☐ Yes, I will be happy to aid you in your master's thesis research. Please mail me your brief questionnaire dealing with entry-level public relations writing skills.

☐ No, I do not wish to complete your questionnaire.

Please print your name here.

Your Input is Appreciated

Appendix B

Ginger Buganski
275 E. High St.
Apt. o-291
Glassboro, NJ 08028

March 8, 2000

Dear PRSA member,

Enclosed you will find the questionnaire you agreed to complete concerning the writing skills of recent public relations graduates. The questions were designed to elicit unbiased responses. Please answer all seven questions and return the completed questionnaire in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope.

Thank you for participating in my public relations graduate thesis research. Your cooperation and input will help me a great deal.

Sincerely,

Ginger Buganski
Rowan University Graduate Student
Public Relations

Public Relations Writing Skills Questionnaire

1. What are the top three skills you consider essential for an entry-level public relations candidate?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

2. What specific writing skills do you look for in entry-level public relations personnel?

3. How would you rate the writing skills of most recent public relations graduates?

1	2	3	4	5
Unacceptable	Need Major Improvement	Acceptable	Need Minor Improvement	Professional Quality

4. In which specific areas are public relations graduates the weakest in terms of writing skills?
(i.e. grammar, format of news releases, writing in news style, active voice, spelling)

5. What are the three most common specific writing weaknesses you see in public relations graduates?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

6. What, if anything, would you suggest educational institutions do to improve the quality of public relations graduates' writing skills?

7. In which areas do you think educational institutions are successfully meeting the needs of the profession?

Please return this completed questionnaire in the self-addressed, stamped envelope supplied. If separated from the envelope, return to Ginger Buganski, 275 E. High St., Apt o-291, Glassboro, NJ 08028.

Appendix C

Ginger Buganski
275 E. High St.
Apt. o-291
Glassboro, NJ 08028

April 6, 2000

Dear PRSA member,

Recently you should have received the questionnaire you agreed to complete concerning the writing skills of recent public relations graduates. If you received the questionnaire and have already returned it to me, I thank you for your participation. In case you haven't received the questionnaire, I have enclosed a copy with this letter.

The questions were designed to elicit unbiased responses. Please answer all seven questions and return the completed questionnaire in the enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope. Please do so by April 21, 2000, so that I can meet my submission deadlines.

Thank you for participating in my public relations graduate thesis research. Your cooperation and input will help me a great deal.

Sincerely,

Ginger Buganski
Rowan University Graduate Student
Public Relations

Appendix D

To: ROWANDOM.GWIA:kwallace@41mad.com
From: Ginger Buganski
Subject: Master's Thesis
CC:

Dear Kenneth Wallace,

Recently you should have received the questionnaire you agreed to complete concerning the writing skills of recent public relations graduates. If you received the questionnaire and have already returned it to me, I thank you for your participation. In case you haven't received the questionnaire, I have enclosed a copy with this e-mail.

The questions were designed to elicit unbiased responses. Please answer all seven questions and return the completed questionnaire to buga8021@rowan.edu. Please do so by May 12, 2000, so that I can meet my submission deadlines.

Thank you for participating in my public relations graduate thesis research. Your cooperation and input will help me a great deal.

Sincerely,
Ginger Buganski
Rowan University Graduate Student

P.S. Please respond even if you no longer wish to complete the survey. Thank you.

Public Relations Writing Skills Questionnaire

1. What are the top three skills you consider essential for an entry-level public relations candidate?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

2. What specific writing skills do you look for in entry-level public relations personnel?

3. How would you rate the writing skills of most recent public relations graduates? Response:

1	2	3	4	5		
Unacceptable		Need Major	Acceptable	Need Minor	Professional	
	Improvement		Improvement	Quality		

4. In which specific areas are public relations graduates the weakest in terms of writing skills? (i.e. grammar, format of news releases, writing in news style, active voice, spelling)

5. What are the three most common specific writing weaknesses you see in public relations graduates?
(such as specific grammatical mistakes)

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

6. What, if anything, would you suggest educational institutions do to improve the quality of public relations graduates' writing skills?

7. In which areas do you think educational institutions are successfully meeting the needs of the profession?