

REPORT OF

The National Commission
on Writing

FOR AMERICA'S FAMILIES,
SCHOOLS, AND COLLEGES

Writing:
A Ticket to Work...
Or a Ticket Out
A Survey of Business Leaders



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SUMMARY

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 resource 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 that 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 resource director.
- Eighty percent or more of the companies in the service and finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) sectors, the corporations with the 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."

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- 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 the 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.

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* (see Appendix A for the executive summary).

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 communications in the public eye and to ensure that *The Neglected “R”* was not itself neglected on library shelves.

The Commission believes that much of what is important in American public and economic life depends on clear oral and written communication. We are convinced that writing is a basic building block for life, leisure, and employment. I am proud to serve as chair of the follow-on effort led by the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges.

This second report from the Commission summarizes the findings of a major survey of 120 members of Business Roundtable, a survey conducted in the spring of 2004. The Roundtable includes some of the most prominent corporations in the United States and the world. We thank the human resource divisions of these corporations for completing the Commission’s survey.

The survey reveals that good writing is taken as a given in today’s professional work. Writing is a “threshold skill” for salaried employment and promotion. It is particularly important in services and in finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE), growing employment sectors that are likely to generate the most new jobs in the coming decade. In a nutshell, the survey confirms our conviction that individual opportunity in the United States depends critically on the ability to present one’s thoughts coherently, cogently, and persuasively on paper.

Bob Kerrey
President
New School University
New York, NY

RESPONSE RATE AND CONFIDENCE IN FINDINGS

- Of 120 Business Roundtable human resource directors surveyed, 64 responded, for a response rate of 53.3 percent (see Table 1).
- Nonresponding Roundtable firms were somewhat larger, on average, but the difference was not statistically significant.

Response Status	Total Employees	Average Employees	Number of Firms	Response Rates
Responders	3,744,166	58,503	64	53.3%
Nonresponders	4,116,811	73,513	56	46.7%
TOTAL	7,860,977	65,508	120	100.0%

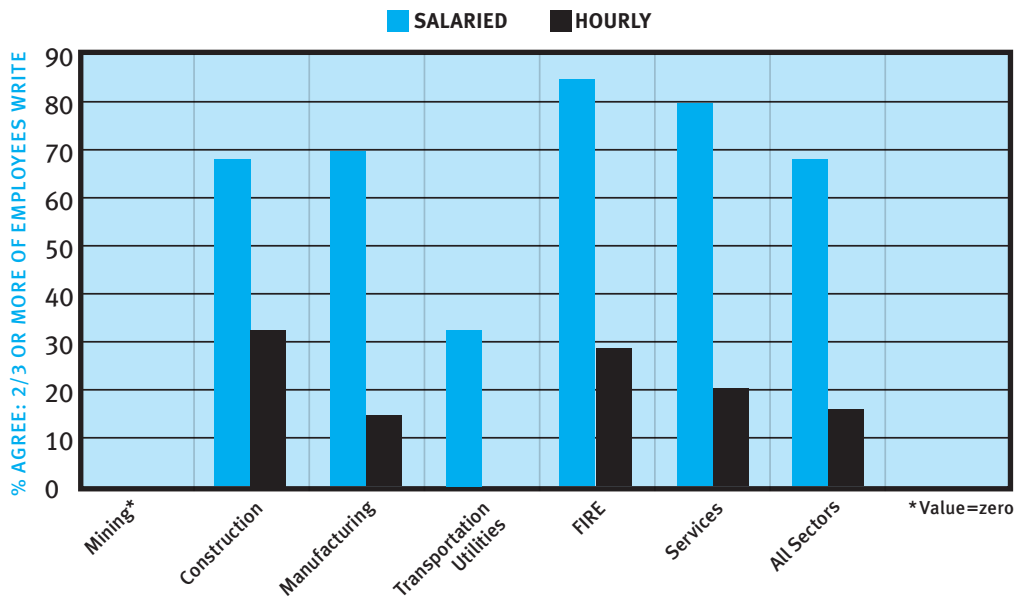
Discussion:

- Business Roundtable is an association of chief executive officers of some of the leading corporations in the United States.
- Statisticians typically anticipate that a response rate of 40 percent for an elite corporate group of this sort would be acceptable. This survey's response rate of 53.3 percent is very robust. It was made possible by aggressive telephone follow-up encouraging human resource officials to complete the survey.
- The telephone follow-up also provided a rich array of comments and observations from the respondents.
- We can be confident that, overall, the results of this survey represent the opinions of human resource personnel in major American corporations. That confidence does not extend to individual industrial sectors.
- Manufacturing employment, for example, is considerably overrepresented among Roundtable membership (see Appendix B). Employment is underrepresented in sectors concerned with construction, mining, wholesale and retail trade, and agriculture, forestry, and fishing. Conclusions about the latter sectors need to be interpreted cautiously. With the exception of wholesale and retail trade, employment in these sectors is considerably lower than employment in services or manufacturing.
- No members of the Roundtable come from government (at any level) or from the small-business community.

HOW IMPORTANT IS WRITING IN THE WORKPLACE?

- Close to 70 percent of responding corporations report that two-thirds or more of their salaried employees have some responsibility for writing, either explicit or implicit, in their position descriptions (see Figure 1).
- With the exception of mining and transportation/utilities, large majorities of salaried employees in all industries are expected to write.
- Writing is almost a universal professional skill required in service industries as well as finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE). It is also widely required in construction and manufacturing.
- Among hourly (i.e., nonprofessional) employees, the expectations for writing are not as high. Even among hourly employees, however, between one-fifth and one-third of employees have some writing responsibilities in fast-growing sectors such as services, FIRE, and construction.

Figure 1:
Most Professional Employees Are Expected to Write



Discussion:

- Most growth in the U.S. economy over the next decade is expected to be in service industries. They are expected to create 20.5 million new jobs in this decade. (Berman, Jay M. "Industry output and employment projections to 2010." *Monthly Labor Review*, Nov. 2001, p. 40.) These are corporations (including those in the FIRE category) reporting that 80 percent or more of salaried employees have some responsibility for writing.

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- Internationally, functions emphasizing communications (such as customer contact and R&D) are least likely to be outsourced. Payroll and information technology, on the other hand, are most likely to be outsourced. (*CEO Briefing: Corporate Priorities for 2004*. A report from the Economist Intelligence Unit, London, New York, Hong Kong, January 2004, pages 26 and 29.)

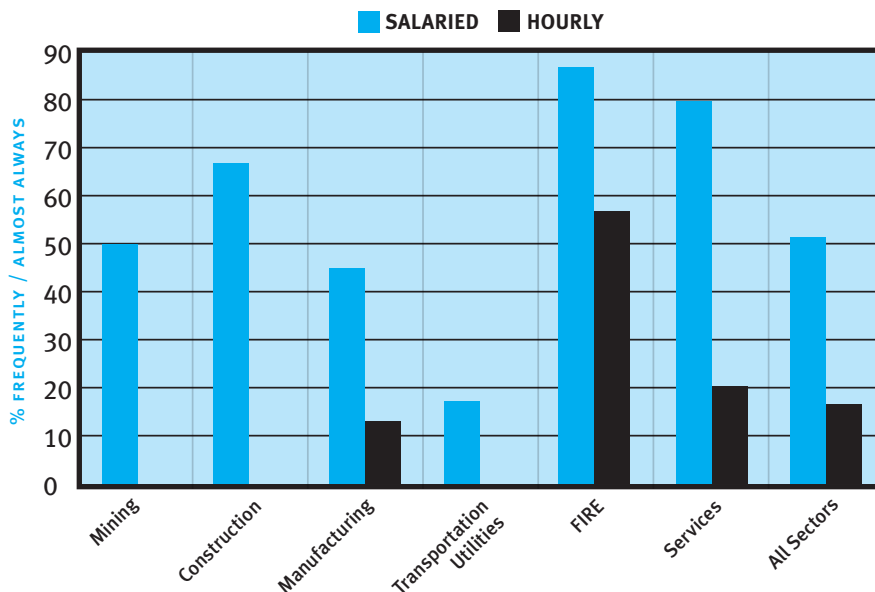
Respondents' Comments:

- “In most cases, writing ability could be your ticket in . . . or it could be your ticket out.”
- “All employees must have writing ability. Everything is tracked. All instructions are written out. Manufacturing documentation, operating procedures, reporting problems, lab safety, waste-disposal operations—all have to be crystal clear. Hourly and professional staff go through serious training. They must be able to communicate clearly, relay information, do postings, and the like. As a government contractor, *everything* must be documented.”
- “Writing skills are fundamental in business. It’s increasingly important to be able to convey content in a tight, logical, direct manner, particularly in a fast-paced technological environment.”
- “My view is that good writing is a sign of good thinking. Writing that is persuasive, logical, and orderly is impressive. Writing that’s not careful can be a signal of unclear thinking.”
- “Most of our employees are hourly . . . so most of our people don’t really write very much.”

IS WRITING AN IMPORTANT HIRING CONSIDERATION?

- More than half (51 percent) of responding companies say that they frequently or almost always take writing into consideration when hiring salaried employees (see Figure 2).
- Among service and FIRE sector companies, 80 percent or more of respondents report taking writing into account frequently, or almost always, when hiring salaried employees.
- Transportation/utilities companies are least likely to take writing into consideration when hiring salaried employees (17 percent).
- Writing is not as important a hiring consideration for hourly employees. Only 16 percent of all responding companies report taking writing into consideration frequently, or almost always, when hiring hourly employees.
- Even among hourly employees, however, writing is a significant hiring consideration in the finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) sector.

Figure 2:
Many Companies Consider Writing in Hiring



Discussion:

- Overall, writing samples are rarely required from job applicants (just 11 percent of responding companies report they require writing samples from applicants for salaried positions).

- However, in companies where writing is considered part of the job (see Figure 1), 54 percent of responding companies require a writing sample, and 71 percent form impressions of applicants' writing abilities based on letters submitted with application materials.
- Fully 86 percent of responding companies report they would hold poorly written application materials against a job candidate, either "frequently" or "almost always." Every responding company in the service sector took this position, as did 86 percent of firms in the FIRE sector.

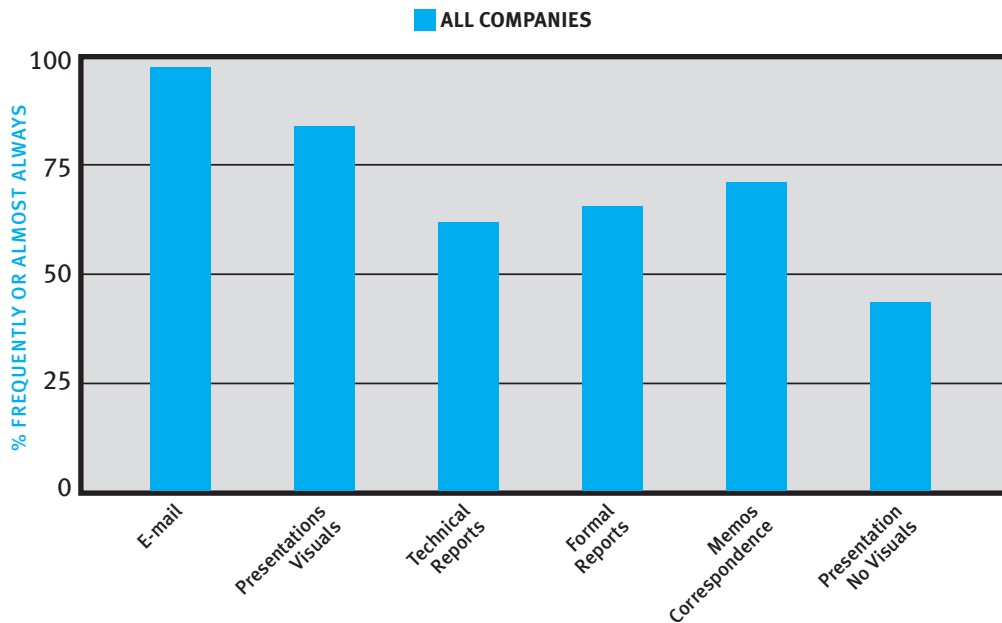
Respondents' Comments:

- Comments from the survey make it clear that interviewers and personnel managers consider poorly written application materials to be a kiss of death in the employment negotiation. They assume that applicants who are careless with important personal communications, such as job applications, are unlikely to be careful with important corporate documents.
- "We are almost always looking for writing skills when hiring, among both hourly and professional employees. It's inherent. We're looking for professionalism in every aspect."
- "Poorly written application materials would be extremely prejudicial. Such applicants would not be considered for any position."
- "We'd frequently hold that against the applicant since it reflects on care and attention to detail."
- "Generally, the staffing office would not pass along a badly written résumé to the hiring divisions."
- "Applicants who provide poorly written letters wouldn't likely get an interview, especially given the large pool who do present themselves well."

WHAT KIND OF WRITING IS EXPECTED ON THE JOB TODAY?

- E-mail and oral presentations with visual aids (e.g., PowerPoint) are ubiquitous in the American economy (see Figure 3).
- More than half of all responding companies also report the following forms of communications as required “frequently” or “almost always”: technical reports (59 percent), formal reports (62 percent), and memos and correspondence (70 percent).
- Whatever the form of communication, it is clear that respondents expect written materials to be accurate, clear, and grammatically correct (see Appendix B).
- Accuracy and clarity are particularly valued in the finance and service sectors; conciseness is not universally held to be important, but respondents in construction value it highly. Visual appeal is considered “important,” but not “extremely important” (Appendix B).

Figure 3:
Some Forms of Writing Are Very Common in Most Companies



Discussion:

- Corporate respondents make clear distinctions between the different requirements for writing, depending on purpose and audience—e.g., clarity and rigor for financial analyses, and scientific precision for technical reports.
- There is a great deal of corporate interest in how changing forms of communication (e.g., e-mail and PowerPoint) modify writing demands.

Respondents' Comments:

- “Business writing generally calls for clarity, brevity, accuracy, and an appropriate level of detail for documenting.”
- “Scientific precision is required almost always for scientists and engineers responsible for preparing formal papers and technical reports.”
- “In offices worried about legal issues, communications and human resources, employees must be able to write well.”
- “E-mail has had a big effect on how people communicate. It makes communication easy on the job, since everyone has a computer, but there are more messages than anyone needs, and more copies to everyone.”
- “In this electronic age, writing skills are critical. Because of e-mail, more employees have to write more often. Also, a lot more has to be documented.”
- “We’re inundated daily with e-mail, and people have to learn to think in ‘core points.’ We need presentation skills on the same basis. Most of us have experienced ‘death by PowerPoint.’ Training should focus on being direct, presenting only what’s needed.”

DO EMPLOYEES HAVE THE WRITING SKILLS EMPLOYERS SEEK?

- By a substantial majority, respondents report that two-thirds or more of their employees (current and new) meet company writing requirements (see Table 2).
- Employers in firms in the service, FIRE, and construction sectors (which rely heavily on writing) are most likely to say that two-thirds or more of their employees possess requisite writing skills.
- Despite what seems to be a generally positive picture, a significant proportion of responding firms (about one-third) report that one-third or fewer of their employees, both current and new, possess the writing skills companies value.

Table 2:
What Percent of Employees Have the Writing Skills Most Valued by Company?

TYPE OF COMPANY	CURRENT WORKFORCE		NEW HIRES	
	About 2/3 or more	About 1/3 or fewer	About 2/3 or more	About 1/3 or fewer
Mining	50.0%	50.0%	50.0%	50.0%
Construction	100.0%	0.0%	66.7%	33.3%
Manufacturing	68.4%	31.6%	71.8%	28.2%
Transportation/ Utilities	0.0%	100.0%	16.7%	83.3%
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	85.7%	14.3%	71.4%	28.6%
Services	80.0%	20.0%	60.0%	40.0%
Total Responding Companies	65.6%	34.4%	64.5%	35.5%

Discussion:

- The Roundtable corporations include many of the blue-chip corporations of the United States. They get their pick of the best graduates from the finest colleges and universities in the United States and the world.

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- Respondents from the services and FIRE sectors are most likely to screen for writing skills, to use writing as a part of the hiring process, and to refuse to hire someone with clearly inadequate skills.
 - Those in the construction sector also report a heavy reliance on writing, and they appear to be satisfied with the writing skills of their employees.
 - In brief, responding corporations in the service, FIRE, and construction sectors hire whom they seek: employees who are able to communicate in the ways most valuable to the employer.
 - Corporations also express a fair degree of dissatisfaction with the writing of recent college graduates—and also with academic styles of writing, unsuited to workplace needs.
 - Since up to one-third of the employees in these blue-chip corporations do not possess adequate writing skills, writing deficiencies may be even more pronounced elsewhere in the broader private sector, particularly among employees of small- and medium-sized businesses.

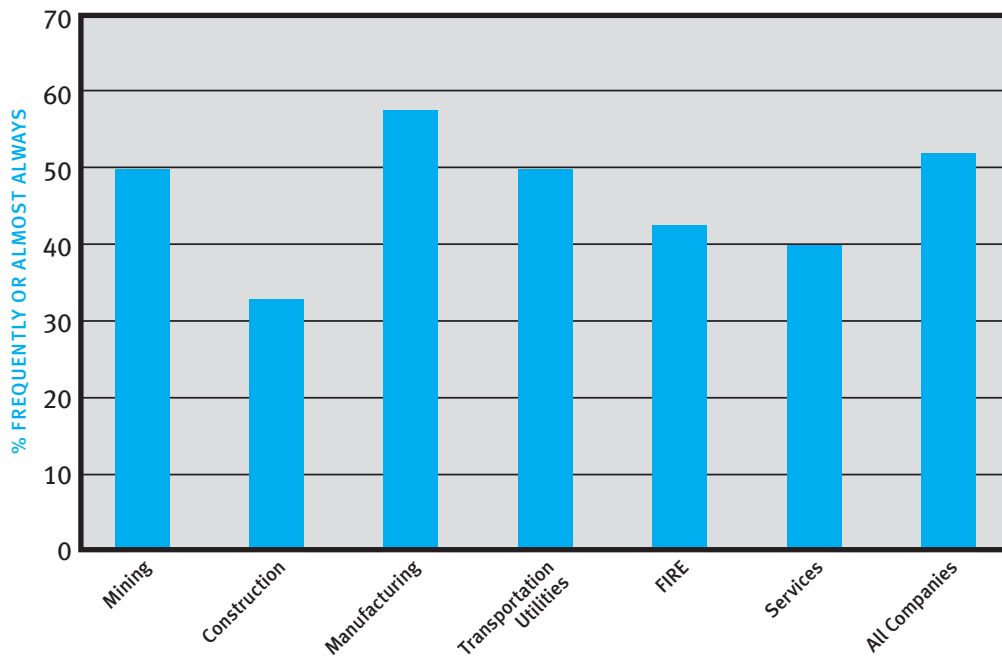
Respondents' Comments:

- “Almost all our people have the skills at the professional level. We screen for them.”
- “Almost all of them have these skills—we wouldn’t hire without them.”
- “The skills of new college graduates are deplorable—across the board; spelling, grammar, sentence structure . . . I can’t believe people come out of college now not knowing what a sentence is.”
- “Recent graduates aren’t even aware when things are wrong (singular/plural agreement, run-on sentences, and the like). I’m amazed they got through college.”
- “People’s writing skills are not where they need to be. Apart from grammar, many employees don’t understand the need for an appropriate level of detail, reasoning, structure, and the like.”
- “Recent graduates may be trained in academic writing, but we find that kind of writing too verbose and wandering.”

IS WRITING A PROMOTION CRITERION?

- More than half of all responding companies take writing skills into account in making promotion decisions for salaried employees (see Figure 4).
- Corporations in the construction sector are least likely to frequently consider writing in promotion decisions (only 33.3 percent say they frequently or always do so); companies in manufacturing are the most likely (57.5 percent).
- With regard to hourly employees, 95 percent of respondents indicate that writing is “never” or “only occasionally” considered as part of promotion decisions.

Figure 4:
Writing Often a Consideration in Professional Promotion



Discussion:

- Employers who are most interested in writing are likely to screen for writing skills in hiring and assume these skills are present. In that sense, promotions would not depend on writing skills, since everyone is assumed to possess them.
- A lack of writing ability is more likely to be a factor in termination than in promotion decisions.

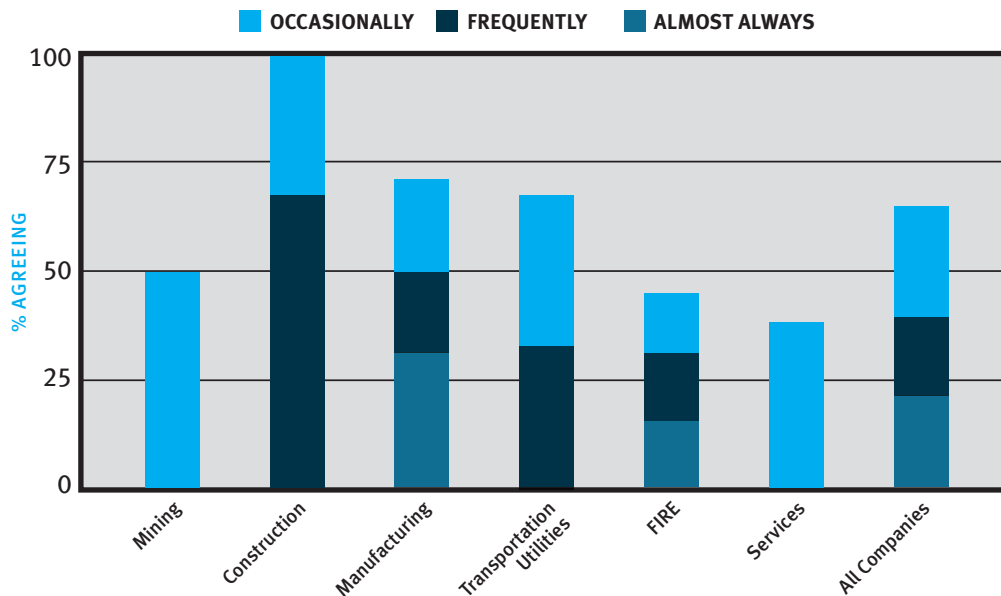
Respondents' Comments:

- Survey comments reveal that many personnel officials found it difficult to conceive of salaried employees with poor writing skills reaching the point where they would be considered for promotion.
- “It would be unusual for someone already on the job to be in this position. Writing would have been part of the hiring process.”
- “It’s more of a negative if missing, than a positive for promoting.”
- “Someone who couldn’t communicate wouldn’t be getting promoted.”
- “If someone is up for promotion, it means they do good work on all fronts.”
- “Writing is integral in nearly every job. It’s really not a promotion issue since you’d never get to the point of promotion without good communications skills. You can’t move up without writing skills.”

DO AMERICAN COMPANIES PROVIDE WRITING TRAINING? IF SO, WHAT DOES IT COST?

- More than 40 percent of responding firms offer or require training or retraining in writing for salaried employees who need it (see Figure 5).
- Construction and manufacturing are more likely than others to provide writing training to salaried employees who need it.
- All responding mining and service employers report they “never” or “only occasionally” provide employees with writing training.
- Relatively few responding firms provide writing training for hourly employees (81 percent of respondents report they “never” or “only occasionally” provide such training).

Figure 5:
Many Companies Provide Writing Training for Valuable Employees



Discussion:

- Where employees need training in writing skills and employers provide such assistance, the average cost of such training is approximately \$950 per employee across industries. However, comments on the forms indicated that the range of services provided is considerable, from online tutoring programs costing very little to full-scale writing workshops priced in the thousands.
- Extrapolating the findings from Roundtable companies (by industrial sector and hourly and salaried employees), we estimate that annual private-sector costs for providing writing training could be as high as \$3.1 billion (see Appendix B).
- The \$3.1 billion figure does not include employees of government or the retail and wholesale trade sector, neither of which is represented among respondents. The total cost to the economy of providing writing training is, therefore, likely to be considerably higher.

Respondents' Comments:

- “We’re likely to send out 200–300 people annually for skills upgrade courses like ‘business writing’ or ‘technical writing.’”
- “We provide training in business writing and documentation. We don’t train in basic writing.”
- “We offer in-house programs to improve writing and communications skills. Our company has been running this program for several years. We even brought in a college professor to improve writing, and he developed six courses for us.”
- “I estimate the costs to range between \$2,500 and \$3,500 per individual, when it’s absolutely necessary to send people for training. We formerly tried doing it in-house, but found it too complex to do effectively.”

IMPLICATIONS

Opinions, even those of high-level corporate executives, should never be the sole basis of policy. Still, three important educational policy implications stand out from the results of this survey.

First, writing appears to be a “marker” attribute of high-skill, high-wage, professional work. This is particularly true in sectors of the economy that are expanding, such as services, and the finance, insurance, and real estate sectors. Educational institutions interested in preparing students for rewarding and remunerative work should concentrate on developing graduates’ writing skills. Colleges and university leaders, as well as school officials, should take that advice to heart. The strength of corporate complaints about the writing skills of college graduates was surprisingly powerful.

Second, writing is also a “gatekeeper.” The equity dimensions of the writing challenge are substantial. People who cannot write in the United States can clearly find employment. The findings of this survey, however, indicate that opportunities for salaried employment are limited for employees unable to communicate clearly. Of particular concern here is the need to develop the language and communications skills of English-language learners, who are likely to be at a disadvantage in today’s workplace. Unless our society pays attention to developing all of the education skills (including writing) of all segments of the population, it runs the risk of consigning many students who are poor, members of minority groups, or learning English to relatively low-skill, low-wage, hourly employment.

Third, the comments provided by the respondents confirm a central argument of the Commission throughout its existence. Writing consists of the ability to say things correctly, to say them well, and to say them in a way that makes sense (i.e., grammar, rhetoric, and logic). Corporate leaders’ comments equating clear writing with clear thinking were impressive. Business writing, of course, is only one form of communication. Even so, business writing, at its best, requires effective communication about work that is frequently complex and intellectually demanding. Skill in such communication is not developed by

a few school hours here and there devoted to writing. Developing the kinds of thoughtful writers needed in business, and elsewhere in the nation’s life, will require educators to understand writing as an activity calling for extended preparation across subject matters—from kindergarten through college.

In *The Neglected “R,”* the Commission stated that writing helps students “connect the dots” in their learning. That metaphor can also stand for career development. In many ways, what this survey tells the nation is that writing helps graduates connect the dots in their careers, as well.

APPENDIXES

- A. Executive Summary of *The Neglected “R”: The Need for a Writing Revolution*
- B. Notes on Methodology
- C. Members of the National Commission on Writing
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- E. Questionnaire
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APPENDIX A

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THE NEGLECTED “R”

American education will never realize its potential as an engine of opportunity and economic growth until a writing revolution puts language and communication in their proper place in the classroom. Writing is how students connect the dots in their knowledge. Although many models of effective ways to teach writing exist, both the teaching and practice of writing are increasingly shortchanged throughout the school and college years. Writing, always time-consuming for student and teacher, is today hard-pressed in the American classroom. Of the three “Rs,” writing is clearly the most neglected.

The nation’s leaders must place writing squarely in the center of the school agenda, and policymakers at the state and local levels must provide the resources required to improve writing. 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 policy should aim to double the amount of time most students spend writing, require a writing plan in every school district, insist that writing be taught in all subjects and at all grade levels, and require successful completion of a course in writing theory and practice as a condition of teacher licensing.
- National political leadership should put the power of the bully pulpit to work through a national conference on writing.
- Higher education should address the special roles it has to play in improving writing. All prospective teachers, no matter their discipline, should be provided with courses in how to teach writing. Meanwhile, writing instruction in colleges and universities should be improved for all students.
- States and the federal government should provide the financial resources necessary for the additional time and personnel required to make writing a centerpiece in the curriculum.

Time

- 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, and parents should review students' writing with them.

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, in writing and elsewhere in the curriculum, in reality as well as in rhetoric.
- Assessments of student writing must go beyond multiple-choice, machine-scorable items. Assessment should provide students with adequate time to write and should require students to actually create a piece of prose.
- Best practice in assessment should be more widely replicated.

Technology

- Government should extend the underlying premise of recent federal telecommunications policy by 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.
- The nation should invest in research that explores the potential of new and emerging technologies to identify mistakes in grammar, encourage students to share their work, help assess writing samples, and incorporate software into measuring student writing competence.

Teachers and Professional Development

- 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 and into college.
- 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.
- Universities should advance common expectations by requiring all prospective teachers to take courses in how to teach writing. Teachers need to understand writing as a complex (and enjoyable) form of learning and discovery, both for themselves and for their students. Faculty in all disciplines should have access to professional development opportunities to help them improve student writing.
- University–school partnerships should encourage greater experimentation and the development of new model programs to improve teaching and learning for English-language learners.

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. 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 writing assessments and the use of technology.

APPENDIX B

NOTES ON METHODOLOGY

Last winter, the National Commission on Writing for America’s Families, Schools, and Colleges agreed that its second report should focus on business and writing. The members wanted to know what business leaders thought about the importance of writing in the workplace. Following discussion with Business Roundtable, the Roundtable agreed to provide the Commission with an existing database of 120 human resource leaders, a subset of the full Roundtable, which includes more than 150 members.

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, respondents should be able to complete the questionnaire easily and quickly. Commission staff promised Roundtable leaders that respondents could complete the instrument in no more than 15 minutes. Second, it should go beyond what respondents said they thought was important about writing to explore what respondents actually do when hiring and promoting employees. Do they require writing samples of applicants? Is writing ability considered when hiring and promotion decisions are made? What kinds of writing are required on the job? Third, the Commission thought it important to distinguish between “hourly” and “salaried” employment when thinking about writing on the job. As a result, most survey questions asked respondents to make that distinction.

The survey was mailed in early March, with the hope that 40 percent (48) or more of the recipients would respond by the end of the month. That expectation was not met. Six weeks after the survey went out, only 20 responses had been received (16.6 percent). At that time, intensive telephone follow-up began. By early June, 64 returns had been received, a response rate of 53.3 percent. Although the initial response rate was disappointing, the telephone follow-up produced an unexpected benefit. Many of those contacted agreed to complete the survey over the telephone. While doing so, most offered spontaneous comments about writing in hiring, employment, and day-to-day life in corporate America. These comments, taken down as they were made, provided the Commission with a rich texture against which to interpret the survey data.

Do These Results Accurately Represent the Views of American Employers?

On page 6 of this report, the Commission noted that although the overall results provide reliable insights into the opinions of business leaders in major American firms, confidence in the results does not translate uniformly to every industrial sector.

The Commission’s conclusions about representation and confidence are based on comparing Roundtable and national employment (see Table A). Both employment pools are categorized according to the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) Manual developed by the federal Office of Management and Budget. Despite the fact that firms involved with finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE) are typically thought of as “service” firms in everyday language, the SIC Manual requires separate classifications for service and FIRE firms. Roundtable employment figures were derived from member companies’ Web sites; national employment figures, from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

It is important to note that no members of Business Roundtable come from government (at any level) or from the small-business community. In addition, BLS data exclude the self-employed, unincorporated firms, private household workers, unpaid family workers, and members of the Armed Forces.

STANDARD INDUSTRY CODE	U.S. (2003)		ROUNDTABLE RESPONDENTS	
	Employed %		Employed %	
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing	3,681,000	2.7%	0	0.0%
Mining	543,000	0.4%	11,700	0.3%
Construction	6,698,000	5.9%	95,511	2.6%
Manufacturing	18,469,000	16.2%	2,578,118	69.2%
Transportation/ Utilities	7,019,000	6.1%	552,900	14.8%
Wholesale/ Retail Trade	30,331,000	26.6%	0	0.0%
Finance, Insurance, Real Estate	7,560,000	6.6%	267,051	7.2%
Services	39,340,000	28.8%	238,886	6.4%
TOTAL	113,641,000		3,744,166	

Against that backdrop:

- As Table A reveals, manufacturing employment is overrepresented in Business Roundtable membership. We can be quite confident of survey findings with regard to manufacturing and writing.
- Employment in construction, mining, wholesale and retail trade, and agriculture, forestry, and fishing is underrepresented among Roundtable respondents. Survey findings here should be weighed cautiously, but by and large, these are the sectors in which respondents indicated less reliance on writing among their employees. In addition, with the exception of wholesale and retail trade (which is not represented among Roundtable respondents), the other sectors are not major employers.
- Employment in the service sector is also underrepresented among Roundtable respondents. Employment in finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE), by contrast, is slightly overrepresented. In general, the Commission believes the findings in both sectors are quite reliable. These are the sectors demonstrating the greatest reliance on writing and are also the sectors expected to grow most rapidly in coming years.

A word about manufacturing is in order. The rust-belt notion of heavy manufacturing in the United States is a twentieth-century image. Roundtable companies categorized as manufacturers do include heavy manufacturing concerns such as Ford Motor Company, DaimlerChrysler, and General Motors. The Roundtable also includes companies such as Abbott Laboratories, Bristol-Myers, Dow Chemical, Eastman Kodak, Fisher Scientific International, IBM, Lockheed Martin, McGraw-Hill, Motorola, Raytheon, and Textron. All of these firms also “manufacture” something and are defined as manufacturers. Yet, each of them, as well as each of the automakers, is as dependent on science, technology, and management skills as it is on raw materials or production methods. A number of these firms, in fact, are located in, or are dependent on, Silicon Valley. As much as the scale of their employment, it is the range and scope of their products and processes that is significant. Member firms in the Roundtable are household names in the American economy.

Perhaps it does not need to be said, but the Commission’s findings cannot be applied to employment in government or small businesses. To the extent that the work of either sector depends heavily on writing (as the work of government undoubtedly does), it is likely that demands for writing competence may be higher than among the large corporations

represented in the Roundtable. If either government or the small-business community is put in a position of hiring new employees from the applicant pool remaining after large corporations have made their selections, the need for training to improve writing in government or small firms is likely to be more urgent.

What Specific Skills Do Employers Value?

In the body of this report, the Commission noted that regardless of the writing products desired in the business world (reports, memoranda, and the like), certain writing skills are considered desirable. These include accuracy, clarity, and proper usage. Visual appeal, while desirable, does not seem to be considered as important as these other features.

Those conclusions were derived from responses to question 7 on the questionnaire, which stated that “Effective written communication can have a number of different characteristics,” and then asked respondents to check off the importance of characteristics in their companies. The complete results are displayed in Table B.

How Important Is	Extremely Important	Important
Accuracy?	95.2%	1.6%
Clarity?	74.6%	22.2%
Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar?	58.7%	36.5%
Conciseness?	41.3%	50.8%
Scientific Precision?	36.5%	33.3%
Visual Appeal?	11.1%	68.3%

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

The report estimates that costs for providing employee writing training may be as high as \$3.1 billion annually. An estimate is just what the word implies—an approximation. The figure could be adjusted down depending on the assumptions embodied in the calculations, or it could be adjusted up. Below is a description of the assumptions built into the Commission's estimate.

Data used:

- Number of hourly and salaried employees in mid-2003 in each of six industrial groupings for which the Commission had comparison data from the Roundtable survey. (Source of employment numbers in six groupings: Bureau of Labor Statistics.)
- Average percent of salaried and hourly workers by industry with writing as part of their job responsibilities. (Source: Survey of Roundtable members.)
- Average proportion of current and new workers who do not have the writing skills required by the given industry. (Source: Survey of Roundtable members.)
- Average proportion of companies within each industry providing some type of retraining for employees without adequate writing skills. (Source: Survey of Roundtable members.)
- Average cost of providing writing training for workers, by industry. (Source: Survey of Roundtable members.)

Based on those factors, the Commission calculates:

Annual cost of training new salaried employees in writing:	\$ 104,860,000
Annual cost of training new hourly employees in writing:	\$ 98,670,000
Annual cost of training current salaried employees in writing:	\$ 1,362,104,758
Annual cost of training current hourly employees in writing:	\$ 1,525,308,436

Grand total: **\$3,090,943,194 annually**

The figures apply only to six of the industrial categories: (1) mining; (2) construction; (3) manufacturing; (4) transportation and utilities; (5) finance, insurance, and real estate; and (6) services. The grand total may underestimate the amount spent in any given year on writing training since the estimate does not include the wholesale and retail trade sector or agriculture, forestry, and fishing (or government at any level).

APPENDIX C

MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON WRITING FOR AMERICA'S FAMILIES, SCHOOLS, AND COLLEGES

Bob Kerrey (Chair)	President, New School University, NY
Arlene Ackerman	Superintendent, San Francisco Unified School District, CA
Taylor Branch	Author, <i>Parting the Waters</i>
Clinton Bristow Jr.	President, Alcorn State University, MS
Linda Bunnell	Chancellor, University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point
Joyce Elliott	Former English Teacher, Pulaski County Schools, AR
Larry R. Faulkner	President, University of Texas at Austin
Michele Forman	Social Studies Teacher, Middlebury Union High School, VT
Carlos A. Garcia	Superintendent, Clark County School District, NV
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M.R.C. Greenwood	Provost, University of California
Wally Haas	Levi-Strauss and the Haas Foundation, CA
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Patricia Stock

Professor of Writing, Michigan State University; and President, National Council of Teachers of English

Betty Pazmino

Teacher, Cesar Chavez Elementary, San Francisco Unified School District

APPENDIX D

MEMBERS OF BUSINESS ROUNDTABLE

MEMBER COMPANY

3M
A. O. SMITH
ABB
ABBOTT LABORATORIES
ACCENTURE
AIR PRODUCTS AND CHEMICALS
ALCOA
ALLSTATE
ALLTEL
AMERICAN ELECTRIC POWER
AMERICAN EXPRESS
AMGEN
AIG
APPLERA
ARCH COAL
ARCHER DANIELS MIDLAND
ARVINMERITOR
ASHLAND
AT&T
AUTOZONE
BAXTER INTERNATIONAL
BECHTEL GROUP
BOEING
BP
THE BRINK'S COMPANY
BRISTOL-MYERS SQUIBB
BURLINGTON NORTHERN SANTA FE
CADENCE DESIGN SYSTEMS
CARLSON COMPANIES
CASE/NEW HOLLAND
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Robert J. O'Toole
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G. Allen Andreas
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Michael T. Dan
Peter R. Dolan
Matthew K. Rose
H. Raymond Bingham
Marilyn Carlson Nelson
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Brian L. Roberts

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Charles O. Holliday

J. Brian Ferguson

Daniel A. Carp

Alexander M. Cutler

Michael H. Jordan

Sidney Taurel

Joseph M. Tucci

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James S. Turley

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Frederick W. Smith

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Herbert L. Henkel

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Wilbur L. Ross Jr.

Steven R. Loranger

William B. Harrison

MEMBER COMPANY**JOHNSON CONTROLS****JOHNSON & JOHNSON****KERR-McGEE****LEHMAN BROTHERS****LIBERTY MUTUAL INSURANCE COMPANIES****LOCKHEED MARTIN****MARSH & McLENNAN****McGRAW-HILL****MEADWESTVACO****MEDCO HEALTH SOLUTIONS****MERCK****MERRILL LYNCH****METLIFE****MORGAN STANLEY****MOTOROLA****NATIONAL GYPSUM****NATIONWIDE****NEW YORK LIFE****NORFOLK SOUTHERN****NORTHWESTERN MUTUAL****OWENS CORNING****PACTIV CORPORATION****PEABODY ENERGY****PFIZER****PPG INDUSTRIES****PRAXAIR****CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER**

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Anne M. Mulcahy

APPENDIX E

QUESTIONNAIRE

**Business Roundtable & National Writing Commission
Human Resource Survey
March 2004**

*Please return by **March 22** to James Harvey, National Writing Commission
9425 35th Avenue NE, Suite E, Seattle, WA 98115 in enclosed envelope
or Fax to 206-526-5340*

Nature of business:¹ (select from footnote) _____

Number of employees on January 1, 2004: in the US outside the US

On average, how many new employees were hired yearly in the past five years (1/1/99 to 12/31/03):..... in the US outside the US

*For each statement below, we'd like you to describe your company's practice. We are interested in your experience, not what you hear about processes elsewhere. **For each statement, please mark the response that most closely describes what happens in your company.***

1. Do you take writing (e.g., of technical reports, memos, annual reports, external communications) into consideration when hiring new employees? *(Please check the box in front of the most appropriate response)*
 - A. Professional ₁ Almost never ₂ Occasionally ₃ Frequently ₄ Almost always
 - B. Hourly ₁ Almost never ₂ Occasionally ₃ Frequently ₄ Almost always

2. How many employees have some responsibility for writing (either explicit or implicit) in their position descriptions?
 - A. Professional ₁ A few ₂ About 1/3rd ₃ About 2/3rds ₄ Almost all
 - B. Hourly ₁ A few ₂ About 1/3rd ₃ About 2/3rds ₄ Almost all

3. When a job either explicitly or implicitly requires writing skills, how do you usually assess a job applicant's writing ability? *(Please check all that apply.)*

<input type="checkbox"/> _A Writing sample provided by job applicant	<input type="checkbox"/> _D Impressions based on letter/written application
<input type="checkbox"/> _B Writing test taking during the job interview	<input type="checkbox"/> _E Other (_____)
<input type="checkbox"/> _C Review of coursework on resume	

4. When you are hiring new employees, how often are samples of written materials or presentations required of the applicant?
 - A. Professional ₁ Almost never ₂ Occasionally ₃ Frequently ₄ Almost always
 - B. Hourly ₁ Almost never ₂ Occasionally ₃ Frequently ₄ Almost always

5. 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?

<input type="checkbox"/> ₁ Almost never	<input type="checkbox"/> ₂ Occasionally	<input type="checkbox"/> ₃ Frequently	<input type="checkbox"/> ₄ Almost always
--	--	--	---

6. Listed below are several forms of communication that are common in American companies. Please indicate how frequently each form is used in your company by circling the appropriate number.

	<u>Almost never</u>	<u>Occasionally</u>	<u>Frequently</u>	<u>Almost always</u>
A. E-mail correspondence	1	2	3	4
B. Other memoranda and correspondence	1	2	3	4
C. Oral presentations with slides/visuals (e.g., PowerPoint).....	1	2	3	4
D. Oral presentations without visuals	1	2	3	4
E. Formal reports	1	2	3	4
F. Technical reports	1	2	3	4

¹ (1) Agriculture, forestry & fishing; (2) mining; (3) construction; (4) manufacturing; (5) transportation & utilities; (6) wholesale & retail trade ; (7) finance, insurance & real estate; or (8) services.

Business Roundtable & National Writing Commission Survey (2)

7. Effective written communication can have a number of different characteristics. In your company, how important are each of these characteristics?

	<u>Not at all important</u>	<u>Not very important</u>	<u>Important</u>	<u>Extremely important</u>
A. Accuracy.....	1	2	3	4
B. Clarity	1	2	3	4
C. Conciseness	1	2	3	4
D. Scientific precision	1	2	3	4
E. Visual appeal	1	2	3	4
F. Spelling, punctuation and grammar	1	2	3	4
G. Other (please specify).....	1	2	3	4

8. In your company's current workforce, approximately how many employees have those skills?

- ₁ A few ₂ About 1/3rd ₃ About 2/3rds ₄ Almost all

9. Approximately how many new employees have the writing skills that your company most values?

- ₁ A few ₂ About 1/3rd ₃ About 2/3rds ₄ Almost all

10. Does your company take effective writing skills into account when making promotion decisions?

- A. Professional ₁ Almost never ₂ Occasionally ₃ Frequently ₄ Almost always
 B. Hourly ₁ Almost never ₂ Occasionally ₃ Frequently ₄ Almost always

11. If an employee possesses outstanding technical but poor writing skills, does your company provide writing training?

- A. Professional ₁ Almost never ₂ Occasionally ₃ Frequently ₄ Almost always
 B. Hourly ₁ Almost never ₂ Occasionally ₃ Frequently ₄ Almost always

12. If your company provides writing training, what is your estimate of the annual cost per trained employee?

Annual estimate per trained employee:

13. Please feel free to provide additional comments below:

APPENDIX F

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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

Our first acknowledgment goes to the human resource officials in Business Roundtable corporations who took the time to complete the survey. We are grateful, in particular, to Susan Traiman, director, education and workforce policy, Business Roundtable, for her assistance in reviewing the questionnaire and encouraging Roundtable members to participate.

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; Sandra Riley, Public Affairs; Joe Brown, Member Services; and Kristen Huff, Research & Psychometrics. We also greatly appreciate the encouragement and guidance the project received from Gene Budig, scholar-in-residence at the College Board.

We want to thank the following for careful reviews of earlier drafts of this report: Kristen Huff of the College Board, Richard Sterling, Mary-Ann Smith, and Judy Buchanan of the National Writing Project; and Susan Traiman of Business Roundtable. The Commission is deeply indebted to them for their guidance. Any errors in the report, of course, remain the Commission's responsibility.

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 developed the initial questionnaire, collated and analyzed the returns, and wrote this report. When survey returns were disappointing in late spring, Vitzthum devoted an enormous amount of time and energy contacting recipients by telephone to encourage them to complete the survey.

