THE BIGGEST WRITING MISTAKES NEW GRADUATES MAKE

New to the work world? Employers say university graduates get these simple things wrong — a lot. Don’t learn the hard way, read this instead.

* By Anh Nguyen 16 September 2015

The job market for new university graduates might be improving, but employers say there are two crucial skills 2015 US grads sorely lack — and they both involve something core to almost any workday: writing.

Companies prioritise clear and direct communication and say it is a vital indicator for quality of work.

According to [research](http://www.shrm.org/Research/SurveyFindings/Documents/SHRM-Hiring-Graduates-2015.pdf) done by the Society of Human Resources Management, new graduates’ written communication skills leave a lot to be desired, from their CVs and cover letters to their work reports and presentations. Writing well is a make-or-break skill that can get you noticed. Writing poorly draws attention too, but for all the wrong reasons.

Where are new graduates going wrong — and how can you avoid these all-too-common mistakes?

**To be clear**

Expressing themselves clearly is tough for young employees.  Yet most companies prioritise clear and direct communication and say it is a vital indicator for quality of work.

That might be obvious in consulting, marketing or other word-heavy careers. Yet it’s just as central in less-obvious professions. The theatre world, for example.

Lindsey Buller Maliekel, who manages the apprentice programme at New York’s New Victory Theater, said clear writing “is integral to the work on stage”, too. Good performers must be able to project their message or act to audiences from diverse backgrounds, and clear writing points to this skill, she said.

Social media use has hurt college grads’ ability to communicate professionally.

When it comes to accounting, numbers matter but so does the ability to explain them. Rod Adams, recruiting leader of Pricewaterhouse Coopers in the US, said it is a misconception that accountants don’t need to write well. For instance, it is important to communicate clearly and with authenticity. That “not only gets your messages across, but also helps you connect and convince other people”, wrote Adams in an email.

**Millennial symptom**

Social media is increasingly creating new work opportunities for college graduates. [Studies](https://www.accenture.com/us-en/insight-2015-accenture-college-graduate-employment-research.aspx) done by Accenture show that social networking is now considered the most effective method of finding a job for 27% of 2015 graduates, beating out other means such as word of mouth (15%) and electronic job boards (14%).

But, social media use has damaged college graduates' ability to communicate professionally. According to Phil Gardner, director of the College Employment Research Institute at Michigan State University in the US, social media-style communication lends itself to short, unsupported writing and typically ignores professional writing etiquette. Even if the interactions between employers and job seekers are changing thanks to social media, there are still protocols that university graduates must remember while connecting with employers, and they often don’t have the practice.

**Getting the message across**

How do you become more authentic when you're presenting yourself to prospective employers? Experts recommend knowing — and telling your story.

For most, writing at the workplace is a continuous learning process.

PwC’s Adams warns against reciting your CV or resume, especially in an interview. It’s better to “tell a story about [yourself], [your] passions, experience and results”, to show how well you will communicate with team members, managers and clients on the job.

**Learning process**

There is, however, only so much new graduates can do to improve their writing before their first job. For most, understanding how to develop your writing skills at work is a continuous learning process, with improvement accumulated from experience. Still, university students can, and should, familiarise themselves with professional writing by doing internships or job shadowing, Gardner suggested.

Katherine LaVelle, managing director of Talent & Organization at Accenture Strategy in the US, believes companies should invest more in learning and development, especially in fundamental skills such as writing, in order to train a more competitive and competent workforce.

“Doing so will not only help organisations attract and retain top talent, but ensure they can develop relevant skills among their workforce to be competitive,” she said.

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