Writing Work Group Report: Undergraduate Writing Preparation and Skills for Entry-Level Public Relations Professionals

Background

The Commission on Public Relations Education issued *Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State* in 2018, the first comprehensive report on undergraduate public relations education since 2006. *Fast Forward* is the product of three years of research with practitioners and educators in the public relations field. Responses by educators and professionals confirmed a key theme that writing continues to be the core skill for entry-level public relations hires—multi-platform and multi-purpose writing skills. Below are the report's key findings related to writing:

- Practitioners ranked writing as the #1 KSA that is foundational to public relations practice, and the top hiring characteristic.

- Professionals also indicated that new practitioners are not equipped with strong writing skills, and more attention and study are needed—the gap between "desired writing performance" and "how frequently it is found is alarming."

- Nearly all educators reported that at least one writing course is required for public relations majors.

One of the report's 10 major recommendations addressed the importance of writing: *"Writing must be a key part of every course. Writing is the core skill identified by survey respondents, and cannot be seen as an isolated ability, unrelated to other courses"* (p. 158). More specifically:

- Writing remains one of the recommended core courses, and should include "the fundamentals of grammar, style, and syntax for a variety of public relations applications and platforms, including conventional, digital, and social media channels."

- Teach and evaluate writing in every public relations class.

- "Undergraduate programs should emphasize and strengthen writing and communication skills associated with other important skills, such as storytelling, editing, and media relations, by offering students exercises or experiences that stimulate writing and communication skills across a variety of formats, genres, and styles and for diverse communication purposes and situations.

The CPRE Writing Work Group was commissioned at the Spring 2018 CPRE meeting at the Institute of Public Relations Bridge Conference in response to the finding of a significant difference between what educators reported they are teaching and what practitioners reported they find to be inadequacies of entry-level public relations hires' writing skills. The Writing Work Group, consisting

of educator and professional members, had three goals: 1) to investigate the CPRE *Fast Forward* findings related to students being under-prepared for professional writing; 2) to investigate undergraduate public relations writing curricula and preparation; and 3) to provide recommendations and resources to assist educators as they train students to meet professional standards. This report shares the survey results, best practices and resources that can be used inside and outside of the classroom to develop better writing skills.

The work group held numerous electronic meetings and conducted extensive secondary and primary research of public relations undergraduate writing preparation, and expectations and skills public relations practitioners require for newly degreed hires. In this report quantitative and qualitative results of that research, as well as resources for educators and practitioners, are provided. The following educators and professionals were members of this work group:

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Research Process and Timeline

1. Preliminary research: Extensive secondary research of undergraduate public relations writing curriculum at more than 300 PRSSA chapter institutions was completed during May-October 2018.

2. Two survey samples were developed, during September 2018-March 2019: Email addresses for about 100 chairs, directors of public relations programs, and public relations writing professors were obtained. Email addresses for about 100 public relations professionals, supplemented by a snowball sample, were obtained. In conjunction, separate surveys were created for practitioners ([Public Relations Professionals' Writing Survey 032719)](#) and educators ([Public Relations Educators' Writing Survey 032719)](#).

3. IRB approval: A project application was submitted to the Azusa Pacific University Institutional Review Board and approved in March 2019. Research questions: What is the writing preparation provided in undergraduate public relations writing curriculum? What writing preparation and skills are most important for entry-level public relations professionals to possess, as perceived by employers?

4.   The parallel surveys--designed for comparison and investigating the significant differences found in the CPRE *Fast.Forward* study--were distributed and completed via Google Forms during April 2019; 106 practitioners responded, and 60 educators responded.

5.   Data were analyzed and additional secondary research and follow-up with respondents was conducted during May and June 2019.

6.   Preliminary reports were presented at the 2019 CPRE meeting, and 2019 IPR Bridge, AEJMC, PRSA, and NCA conferences.

7.   Second round of soliciting writing resources from educators (e.g., syllabi, writing assignments and rubrics) and practitioners (e.g., writing tests, exercises) occurred during September-November 2019.

8.   Quantitative results, presented at 2019 AEJMC Conference, and previously at IPR, NCA, and PRSA Conferences.

Results

Practitioners (See full results at [Public Relations Professionals' Writing Survey](#))

Demographics. Nearly 80 different titles or positions are held by the 103 respondents of this question on the public relations practitioner survey. The most common were these:

- Director (24)
  - Public Relations
  - Communication
  - Corporate Communications
  - PR & Marketing Communication
  - University Communications and Marketing
  - Communications and International Relations
  - Internal Communications
  - Advancement Communications
  - Operations
  - External Affairs
  - Public Relations and Communications
  - Account
- Manager/Supervisor (16)
  - Account Executive
  - Public Relations
  - Communications
  - Global Communications
  - Regional Communication
- CCO/Vice President/EVP/SVP/AVP (14)
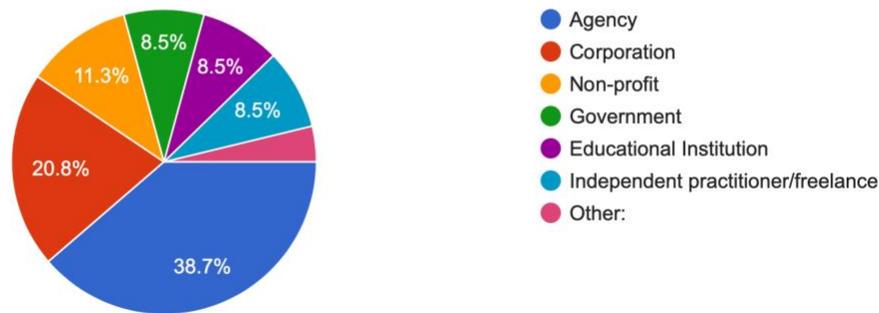 - Integrated Marketing & Communications

- ○ Communications and International Relations
- ○ Public and Government Affairs
- ○ Crisis and Risk Management
- ○ Development
- ○ Global Communications Officer
- President/Owner/Partner/Principal/CEO (10)

Respondents worked in offices across the United States, from Anchorage to Boston, and in Canada (Ottawa and Calgary), and reported working in public relations between 1 and 49 years (*M* = 19.34 years, *SD* = 10.36).

The three most common workplaces were agencies (38.7%), corporations (20.8%), and nonprofits (11.3%).

Which best describes your work environment?
106 responses

- Agency
- Corporation
- Non-profit
- Government
- Educational Institution
- Independent practitioner/freelance
- Other:

The most common sectors were health/medical (14.3%), nonprofit (8.6%) and educational institution (8.6%).

Writing. When asked "What writing elements do you/members of your team regularly write?", from a list of 26, the 106 PR practitioners indicated these writing tasks:

- Press releases (90.6%)
- Social media posts/social media calendars (88.7%)
- Website copy (86.8%)
- PR plans (83%)

PR pros were asked which of these 26 tools they expect a new graduate to be able to write on the first day at work; the top writing task was a press release (91.5%), followed by social media posts (85.8%) and media alerts/calendar alerts/media advisories (75.5%). Practitioners were also asked to select up to five writing tasks (of the same 26 tools) that they deemed critical for recent graduates to know how to execute, and responded with these:

- Press releases (88.7%)
- Social media posts/social media calendar (67.9%)
- Pitch letters/emails (65.1%)
- Fact sheets (49.1%)
- Media alerts (48.1%)

Practitioners were next asked, "For which writing components would more education and skills be most valuable, prior to joining your organization?" Of the 26 components, these five ranked highest: PR plans (66%), website copy (36.8%), press releases (35.8%), and pitch letters (35.8%).

PR pros predicted that, from the list of 26 tools, these writing components would have a growing importance within the next 5 years:

- Social media posts/calendars (73.3%)
- Video (59%)
- Website copy (57.1%)
- Blog posts (53.3%).

When looking farther into the future, in 10 years public relations professionals pointed to social media posts (60.8%), PR plans (50%), website copy (49%), blog posts (45.1%) and video scripts (39.2%) as the top writing elements for professionals.

After indicating the writing skills that they execute and value the most, practitioners were asked how often college graduates entered the workforce with the writing skills they needed to be successful in the profession. The majority of respondents indicated "sometimes" (67.6%), followed by "rarely" (22.9%).

Overall, do you think college/university graduates enter the profession with the writing skills needed to be a successful PR practitioner?
105 responses

Response	Count
Often	8 (7.6%)
Sometimes	71 (67.6%)
Rarely	24 (22.9%)
Never	0 (0%)
Always	3 (2.9%)
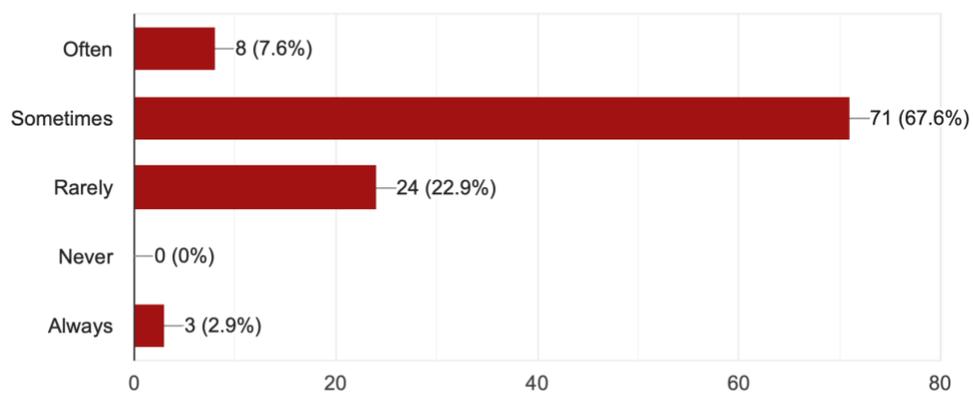
Forty-five practitioners offered additional comments in a final open-ended question. One participant suggested: "More writing classes!! Educators shouldn't be afraid to boldly critique student writing. PR professionals need to develop critical thinking skills. They need to be encouraged to read widely and often."

Another participant pointed to a particular type of writing training needed: "I find that many recent grads can put together a press release or advisory, but struggle with the concept of pitching. I think more education around this would be great. During my career, that's the skill I've had to develop the most (and the one I use the most!)"

Others suggested students learn the difference between writing to various audiences, including B2B and internal audiences, and be trained to write a variety of copy, from short, witty posts to OpEds, and from persuasive writing to informative pieces. Several respondents insisted students need a good grounding in AP style and basic writing mechanics. Respondents recommended certain activities to help improve students' writing, including multiple internships and a required semester on the campus newspaper staff.

Educators (See full results at [Public Relations Educators' Writing Survey](#))

Demographics. Most of the 60 educator respondents are on the faculty at 4-year public universities (76.7%) or 4-year private universities (21.7%).

Which best describes your work environment?
60 responses

- 4-year public university
- 4-private university
- 2-year university
- Other:
- Other

21.7%

76.7%
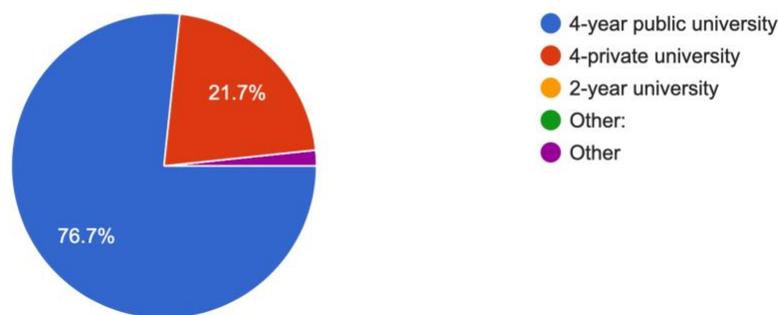
They have been teaching public relations for an average of 13 years ($SD = 9.24$), and have worked in public relations for an average of 13 years outside the classroom ($SD = 11.34$). The most common professional sectors in which they had worked were travel/tourism (24.6%), association/nonprofit (15.8%), and health/medical (10.5%).

Writing. When asked what writing tasks professors teach, of 26 tools (identical to the list in the practitioners' survey), the 60 educators indicated that these are the most common:

- Press releases (96.7%)
- PR plans (81.7%) and fact sheets (81.7%)
- Pitch letters/emails (80%) and social media posts/calendars (80%)

Professors listed these writing tasks as that the most likely that new hires would be expected to execute starting the first day of work:

- Press releases (98.3%)
- Social media posts (90%)
- Pitch letters/emails (88.3%)
- Fact sheet (86.7%)
- Media alerts (83.3%).

Educators indicated that the most critical writing tasks for entry-level professionals are press releases (98.3%), social media posts (76.7%), and pitch letters/emails (70%). Professors reported spending the most time training students to write press releases (95%), PR plans (65%), social media posts (46.7%), and pitch letter/email (45%). The remaining writing tools on the list were widely dispersed, ranging from 0-28.3%.

Public relations educators predicted that these writing components would gain importance within the next 5 years:

- Social media posts (86.4%)
- Website copy (64.4%)
- Blog posts (50.8%)

When looking farther into the future, professors predicted that in 10 years social media posts (80%), website copy (58.3%), and PR plans (45%) and video (45%) would gain in importance. Overall, however, there seemed to be little agreement about other important writing tools for public relations professionals,, 5-10 years in the future.

Finally, professors were asked, "Overall, do you think the graduates from your college/university enter the profession with the writing skills needed to be a successful PR practitioner?" Over 93% responded either sometimes (50.8%) or often (42.4%).

Discussion, Recommendations, and Resources

Given that the Writing Work Group's first goal was to investigate the CPRE *Fast Forward* findings related to students being under-prepared for professional writing, the surveys were designed to include some identical or parallel questions for comparing public relations practitioners' and educators' responses. Therefore, identification and discussion of the extent to which their results converged or diverged is important.

First, practitioners were asked which writing elements they and their team regularly write, whereas educators were asked which types of materials they typically train their students to write. Educators and PR pros agreed that the news release is the top writing task for entry-level hires, and ranked the other top skills similarly, with the exception of website copy. Practitioners reported that website

copy is the third most-frequent entry-level writing task (87%), whereas for educators, website copy training ranked 6th (63%), **suggesting that additional focus on writing copy for websites should be considered for undergraduate writing curriculum.**

	Pros Do Regularly	Most Frequently Taught
News Releases	90.6%	97.7%
Social Media Posts/Calendars	88.7%	80%
Website Copy	86.8%	61.7%
PR Plans/Campaigns	83%	81.7%
Fact Sheets	74.5%	817%
Pitch Letters/Emails	71.7%	80%

Second, both practitioners and educators were asked which writing elements they expect an entry-level practitioner, recent graduate, to be able to write the first day on the job. Again, both educators and practitioners agreed on the top writing skill expected, followed by social media writing, and both ranked fact sheets fourth. PR pros, however, ranked media alerts/calendars third while educators ranked pitch letters/emails third, and ranked pitch letters/emails fifth while educators ranked them third. **These results suggest additional preparation in writing media alerts/calendars/advisories.**

1st Day	Pros Expect	Educators Expect
News Releases	91.5%	98.3%
Social Media Posts/Calendars	85.8%	90%
Media Alerts/Calendars/Advisories	75.5%	83.3%
Fact Sheets	71.7%	86.7%

Pitch Letters/Emails	67.9%	88.3%

Third, both practitioners and educators were asked which writing elements they think are most critical for an entry-level person to be able to execute. On this question, **PR pros and educators ranked writing skills identically, with some minor variation of percentages, indicating a high and perhaps surprising level of agreement, given responses to some other questions.**

Critical Skills	Pros	Educators
News Releases	88.7%	98.3%
Social Media Posts/Calendars	67.9%	76.7%
Pitch Letters/Emails	65.1%	70%
Fact Sheets	49.1%	51.7%
Media Alerts/Calendars/Advisories	48.1%	45%

Fourth, practitioners were asked for which writing components would additional education and skills be most valuable, prior to joining their organization, whereas educators were asked which writing skills students focus the most time on learning in their program. **There were multiple interesting findings here: (1) there was great variability among practitioners regarding needed additional writing education and skills across the 26 listed types of public relations writing, indicating significant customization of writing depending on industry context; (2) PR plans received nearly identical percentages by practitioners and educators, with pros ranking them first, parallel to educators' responses to question #1 that PR plans/campaigns were the second-most frequently used writing component (81.7%), indicating strong agreement; (3) while website copy was the second-most desired area for more focus by practitioners, this writing skill was absent from the educators' list of top 5 skills; (4) fact sheets ranked fifth on the educators' list, yet was absent from the PR pros' list; (5) there was near-consensus by educators that they spend the most time on cultivating skills in writing news releases, and only 36% of practitioners said additional skills are needed; (6) and pitch letters were ranked fourth by both practitioners and educators.**

We recommend that educators focus additional training in writing website copy, and less attention to news release writing.

Pros Want More		Educators Spend Most Time On	
PR Plans	66%	News Releases	95%
Website Copy	36.8%	PR Plans	65%
News Releases	35.8%	Social Media Posts/Calendars	46.7%
Pitch Letters/Emails	35.8%	Pitch Letters/Emails	45%
Social Media Posts/Calendars	34%	Fact Sheets	28.3%

Fifth, both educators and practitioners were asked which writing components they think will have a growing importance in the next 5 years. Both PR pros and educators reported that they anticipate the most growth related to social media writing in the next five years, and rated website copy and blog posts similarly. However, practitioners rated growth in website writing skills significantly higher than did educators; podcasts/audio were the fifth-highest writing anticipated to grow by PR pros, yet did not make educators' top 5 list. **We recommend additional training in video and podcasts/audio writing skills.**

Pros Expect Growth In 5 Years		Educators Expect Growth In 5 Years	
Social Media Posts/Calendars	73%	Social Media Posts/Calendars	86.4%
Video Scripts/Content	59%	Website copy	64.4%
Website Copy	57.1%	Blog Posts	50.8%
Blog Posts	53.3%	PR Plans	39%

Podcasts/Audio	48.6%	Video	39%

Sixth, both educators and practitioners were asked which writing components they think will have a growing importance in the next 10 years. Practitioners and educators differed less in percentages on this question than on most others, although educators anticipated more growth in social media and video writing than did practitioners.

Pros Expect Growth In 10 Years		Educators Expect Growth In 10 Years	
Social Media Posts/Calendars	60.8%	Social Media Posts/Calendars	80%
PR Plans	50%	Website Copy	58.3%
Website Copy	49%	PR Plans	45%
Blog Posts	45.1%	Video	45%
Video Scripts/Content	39.2%	Blog Posts	41.7%

Seventh, both practitioners and educators were asked if they believe that, overall, college/university graduates enter the profession with the writing skills needed to be a successful PR practitioner. **The divergence in rankings of preparedness of entry-level hires for professional writing in public relations positions was consistent with the gap that was seen in the CPRE *Fast Forward: Foundations and Future State* report, and which initiated this follow-up study. Educators rated their graduates as significantly more prepared for writing in the profession than did practitioners. While this study did uncover areas where additional training is recommended (e.g., website and video writing), overall, the quantitative findings indicate that educators focus writing training in areas that practitioners report are most frequently used and most critical for new hires.**

Frequency	Pros	Educators
Always	2.9%	3.4%

Often	7.6%	42.4%
Sometimes	67.6%	50.8%
Rarely	22.9%	5.1%

The *Fast Forward* and the Writing Work Group's findings underscore the need for educators to survey alumni who are working in the profession and maintain those relationships, as well as relationships with other practitioners in a variety of industry sectors, to have an ongoing awareness of the essential writing skills needed by graduates as they enter the field, and collaborate (e.g., through portfolio review by pros) to ensure adequate writing preparation.

Finally, practitioners were asked to respond to an open-ended question: Is there anything else you would like to share that could benefit the writing education for future PR professionals? Forty-five participants offered comments, and these primary categories for additional writing training and recommendations emerged, with these representative comments:

There is a lack of understanding of how to write basic business communications

- o How to craft a professional email
- o The difference between internal and external communication
- o The art of being succinct and direct
- o They are educated to write academically, and need to be able to write persuasive copy, conversational copy or engaging copy using writing best practices.

New hires need to know basic grammar, sentence structure and punctuation

- o Writers need to know grammar and syntax.
- o Should know about pronoun-antecedent agreement, dangling modifiers, and misplaced relative clauses.
- o New professionals should be competent and versatile writers who have already mastered the mechanical basics of a variety of forms.

New hires need to have writing skills in multiple fields

- o Strengthen AP Style and news writing skills, and spend a semester writing for student media
- o Know difference between and have skills in creative writing and writing to inform
- o Need training in B2B
- o Learn to summarize research in a compelling way

Critical thinking is a necessary and lacking skill in new hires

- o Think like their audience
- o Focus on WHY vs. HOW
- o Should be encouraged to read widely and often
- o "Connecting the dots" is a must-have skill along with knowing how current news impacts various types of industries at various levels: economic, environmental, social, etc.

With the goal of responding to these expressed needs for additional writing training and recommendations, we have gathered numerous writing resources that educators may access for their writing curriculum; likewise, practitioners may find them useful in their training of new hires.

	TEXTBOOKS	OTHER BOOKS	ONLINE RESOURCES
How to write basic business communications	*Writing Tools: 55 Essentials for Every Writer.* Clark *The Basics of Media Writing: A Strategic Approach.* Kuehn & Lingwall *Strategic Communication for Organizations.* LaBelle & Waldeck *Public Relations: The Basics.* Smith *Public Relations Writing Worktext: A Practical Guide for the Profession.* Zappala & Carden	*On Writing Well.* Zinsser *The Elements of Style.* Strunk & White	Culprit Business Writing Blog Purdue OWL/Online Writing Lab

| **Basic grammar, punctuation and sentence structure** | *Public Relations Writing: the Essentials of Style and Format (8th edition).* Bivins

The PR Style Guide: Formats for Public Relations Practice. Diggs-Brown

Everybody Writes: Your Go-to Guide to Creating Ridiculously Good Content. Handley

When Words Collide: A Media Writer's Guide to Grammar and Style, 9th edition. Kessler & McDonald

Public Relations Writing: Form & Style. Newsom

The New Rules of Marketing and PR. Scott | *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*

The Associated Press Stylebook 2019 and Briefing on Media Law. Froke | Publication Coach |

Writing skills in multiple fields and platforms	*Writing and Reporting for the Media + a Style Guide for News Writers & Editors (11th edition).* Bender, Davenport, et al.		Ad Age
	A Strategic Guide to Technical Communication. Graves & Graves		Interactive Advertising Bureau
			brandchannel
	Cross-cultural Journalism and Strategic Communication: Storytelling and Diversity. Len-Rios & Perry		PR Week
			Institute for Public Relations (IPR)
	Strategic Writing: Multimedia Writing for Public Relations, Advertising and More. Marsh, Guth & Short.		Journal of Interactive Advertising
	Public Relations Writing and Media Techniques. Wilcox & Reber		PRSA Public Relations Society of America
	Social Media for Strategic Communication: Creative Strategies and Research-based Applications. Freberg		PRSSA Public Relations Student Society of America
			Wylie Communications
	Shoot, Edit, Share: Video Production for Mass Media, Marketing, Advertising, and Public Relations. Johnson & Radosh		Bad Pitch Blog
			PR Daily
	Social Media: How to Engage, Share, and Connect. Luttrell		
	Social media strategy: marketing, advertising, and public relations in the consumer revolution. Quesenberry		

Critical Thinking	*Ethical Practice of Social Media in Public Relations.* DiStaso & Bortree	*Think Like a Rockstar.* Collier	
	Reflections on Leadership and Ethics in Complex Times. Fairhurst.	*The 7 Habits of Highly Effective College Students: Succeeding in College…and in Life.* Covey	
	Legal and Ethical Considerations for Public Relations. Gower	*Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die.* Heath & Heath	
	Persuasion: Theory and Research. O'Keefe		
	Ethics in Public Relations: A Guide to Best Practice. Parsons.		
	Strategic Planning for Public Relations. Smith		
	Law for Advertising, Broadcasting, Journalism, and Public Relations. Parkinson & Parkinson		

In addition, undergraduate writing syllabi and assignments were solicited from current full-time public relations faculty teaching in colleges and universities that sponsor Public Relations Society of America chapters. Resources are provided in these categories:

- Communication/PR Research
- Corporate/Internal Communications/Higher Ed PR Writing
- Critical Thinking, Diversity and Inclusion
- Public Relations and Media Writing
- Public Relations Law and Ethics
- Public Relations Plans and Agencies
- Public Relations Principles
- Social Media