
Writing Well as an Essential Skill for Professionals in Parks, Recreation, and Tourism: Why Do We Need It and How Do We Do It?

Administrators' Perspectives

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Abstract

Although writing is an important skill for all professionals, many students in parks, recreation, and tourism do not see the relevance of learning and applying the skills of writing well in parks, recreation, and tourism courses. This article outlines the reasons good writing is beneficial for students and provides concrete guidelines for how they can improve their writing. These tips include structuring an argument, using proper grammar, synthesizing ideas, rewriting, and presenting content professionally. After reading this article, students will be able to understand what it takes to become a good writer and will have the motivation to apply these skills both in the classroom and in professional settings.

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“Why do we have to write?” “This isn’t an English course. Why did you take points off for grammar?” “Why did you take points off for writing? I write good.” These are questions many of us have heard in our classes on a regular basis. It seems as though many students do not fully understand the necessity of writing in their future careers and do not comprehend the process of writing or the benefits of learning to write well. Furthermore, it is easy for a college professor to assume that students learn writing in high school, which is increasingly not the case, and it is difficult to take time out of an already packed semester to discuss what constitutes a well-written paper. Unfortunately, this lack of understanding, along with unclear explanations of what good writing is, can lead to poor or inconsistent performance on student papers and other assignments. Although writing will be necessary in their future professions, many students are simply not “getting it.” Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to outline why formal writing is such a crucial skill for undergraduate students in parks, recreation, and tourism and to set clear guidelines to lead students to improved writing. While there are currently many lengthy manuals that describe the techniques and intricacies of writing (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2009; Strunk & White, 2000), this article presents a condensed version of that information for students and focuses specific attention on issues many professors face in grading papers.

Technology is one factor that may have contributed to the apparent decrease in writing skills. With the advent of smartphones, email, instant messaging, and texting, students may essentially spend more time writing than ever before. However, this time is usually spent in informal and cryptic writing among friends. When having a conversation with friends, people typically speak differently than they would if they were to approach the president of a bank for a loan or a lawyer about reviewing their risk management procedures. Just as there is a difference between and a place for both informal and formal speaking, there is a difference between and a place for informal and formal writing. Unfortunately, due in part to the amount of time students practice writing informally, students will often defer to this casual style in all areas of written communication.

It should come as no surprise that students engage in the type of informal writing they are most used to when writing papers, especially considering that they are spending less time learning how to write formally. Writing used to be a skill taught before students entered (or were admitted to) college, so instructors assumed that students understood and could demonstrate formal writing skills. An increase in requirements on high school teachers, however, cuts down on the amount of time available for skill development outside of state and national requirements. This means that students are frequently beginning college without a sound foundation in formal writing, and professors are now tasked with helping students improve in this area as well as with delivering the important content of the course. Students at this point in their academic lives may believe that writing is unnecessary or that they already know how to do it and, consequently, do not perform as well as they could on papers. Thus, it is crucial for students to learn why writing is important and how to do it to improve their skills and be better prepared for their futures.

Why Is Writing Well Important?

An article in *The New York Times* declared that there is a shortage of employees in corporate America who can adequately express themselves through writing (Dillon,

2004). In fact, according to the article, corporations regularly spend billions of dollars each year retraining remedial writers or choose not to retain employees who cannot write. As writing is a crucial skill for business, this means that professionals who write well are a benefit to a company as they can save it money. Therefore, individuals who are good writers could have an advantage in gaining and keeping jobs.

Within the park, recreation, and tourism field, regardless of where students pursue their careers, they are required to write formally (and informally) on a daily basis. Job applications, executive summaries, emails, interoffice memos, evaluation reports, grant applications, risk management reports, loan applications, medical reports, and writing articles for professional journals are all tasks required within the scope of the industry. Yet a disconnect exists between what these students actually need to be able to do and what they think they will be doing: in this particular case, writing well. Formulating good writing habits, according to Jacobs (2011), is an essential skill that is developed over time and cannot be merely a temporary fix. Somehow, students and college professors must come together to produce a culture that includes a curiosity of and engagement with the formal writing process. College professors must provide students opportunities to understand the importance of writing, help them distinguish when formal and informal writing is appropriate, and help them learn the basic skills of writing.

What Does It Mean to Write Well in PRT?

Understanding why writing is an important skill leads to the question “How should it be done?” The most important aspect to writing well lies in the reasons we write in the first place. The primary purpose in writing is to communicate ideas. Whether communicating to another professional about a potential job, to a funding agency about grant possibilities, or to a professor about a topic presented in class, we write to take our thoughts and put them on paper in a way that will make another person clearly understand the subject. This means that for something to be considered well written, the intended audience needs to understand it. While what is written should demonstrate that the writer is a competent professional, the goal of what is written is to make the reader understand the writer’s thoughts, not to make the writer look smart. In other words, whatever is written should not make things more complex than they actually are or leave out any important information.

A great number of techniques contribute to making a written idea understandable. Among the most important is clear organization. Organization in writing should be thought of as a global positioning system (GPS). When using a GPS to travel somewhere, the GPS does not give directions haphazardly. There is a system to it. It starts at the beginning and takes the driver step-by-step until arriving at his or her destination. It does not steer the driver in the wrong direction, leading him or her someplace that was unintended or unplanned. It is the same with writing a paper. Any paper or written document should start at the beginning and work through step-by-step until the reader reaches the final conclusion. Just like a GPS works with directions, proper organization of a paper will guide readers systematically through the writer’s message, allowing them to arrive at the intended destination.

Organizing a document starts with outlining the arguments. Main points need to be made and then put in a logical order so that it is clear how each idea leads to the

next in a sequential order. The next step is to take the main points in the outline and turn them into topic sentences. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence, and all the other sentences in the paragraph should relate directly to that topic sentence. In addition, each sentence should clearly relate to the sentence immediately before and immediately after it. This makes it so that ideas flow smoothly and the reader is easily able to determine how thoughts are connected. After each paragraph is thoughtfully structured within the argument, transitions are needed between paragraphs. Again, this helps the reader to pay attention and not become lost between ideas; if ideas jump around and the reader becomes lost, it is more difficult for him or her to understand the content and a communication breakdown occurs.

Another key in making writing understandable is adjusting the tone to the audience. Every audience is different, and the tone of the written work should correspond to the person reading it. As mentioned earlier, students are used to writing to their friends and using the style and language that is appropriate with that audience. The writer must adjust when the audience changes. The style and tone of a conversation is different between a student and a professor (or between two professionals) than it is between two friends. Similarly, the style and tone of a paper should be different than in a text message. Students should make an effort to use professional language and write out words rather than use abbreviations and contractions. Avoiding slang and unnecessary jargon also makes a person seem more professional. This means avoiding words such as *hey*, *can't*, *like*, and *cool* or acronyms such as *LOL*.

In addition, writers should also employ the basics of good writing, including proper grammar. Grammar is the foundation of language, and misusing it can drastically change the meaning of a sentence. As Truss (2003) points out, there is a big difference between a panda that eats shoots and leaves and a panda that eats, shoots, and leaves. In the first instance, a panda is simply eating while in the second the panda is eating, then shooting, then leaving (personally, I would rather spend time with the first panda than the second). In short, punctuation as a part of grammar has a purpose, and to communicate the proper message, proper punctuation is necessary.

When attempting to use proper grammar, students might find it difficult to remember all the rules, but there is help available. *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White (2000) is considered the authority on American grammar and is used as a guidebook for writers of all abilities. In addition, other style manuals, such as the American Psychological Association's *Publication Manual* (2009), offer helpful pointers. All of these can help the novice writer figure out the rules and the more experienced writer refresh his or her memory on the specifics.

Furthermore, there are some standard and regularly overlooked rules that would be helpful for all to learn. For example, one of the most common grammatical mistakes is agreement between nouns, pronouns, and verbs. The writer should remember that if a singular noun (person) is used, he or she must also use a singular pronoun (his or her) rather than the commonly used plural pronoun (their). Furthermore, the writer must ensure that the verb being used also agrees with both the nouns and the pronouns to which it is related. Mistakes frequently occur regarding businesses. A business (such as Nike) is usually a singular noun, and consequently, it requires the use of singular pronouns and singular verbs, leading to sentences such as the following: "Nike is a corporation that supplies its employees with good benefits. It frequently provides discounts on merchandise to workers."

In addition to grammatical rules on agreement, several other common mistakes can be corrected including the use of incomplete sentences and incorrect comma usage. For a sentence to be complete, it needs an actor (a noun or pronoun that is performing the action) and a verb (that describes the action). Without each of these components, it is simply either a phrase or a clause, and needs to be a part of a larger, more complex sentence. For example, the clause “because my teacher told me to” is not a complete sentence, but rather it is a dependent clause explaining why a behavior occurred. To complete the sentence, the writer would need to include who is performing the action (a noun) and what that action is (a verb). Therefore, a complete sentence would actually state “I stopped looking at Facebook during class because my teacher told me to.”

A great misunderstanding also exists on the use of commas. Commas should not be placed randomly in a sentence, as they have a specific grammatical purpose. Appropriate uses for commas include separating words in a list (e.g., My professor is smart, kind, and understanding), separating parenthetical expressions (e.g., I worked hard on this paper; however, it still is not done), and separating a clause or a phrase from the rest of the sentence (e.g., As I walked to class, someone on a unicycle knocked me over, making me late). Commas should not, however, be used when joining two independent clauses. For a more thorough description of how to use commas, see Strunk and White (2000).

While grammar is important for proper communication of ideas, style is also a factor in how the intended message is received. Part of writing style involves understanding how our brains are designed. Two things in particular about how our brains work apply to writing style. If the writer follows these techniques, the reader will receive the information much more easily. First, length of the message matters. If the message is too long, readers tend to lose focus and start thinking about something else. This is why a writer should pay attention to paragraph length. Spending more than a page on the same paragraph can cause the reader to lose focus. When this occurs, the idea is no longer being communicated and the intended message is lost.

Second, our brains are designed to recognize changes. Whether it is people who pass us on the street or sentence structures in a paragraph, changes help our brains maintain focus longer. This means that ideas will be communicated more effectively if the writing style is consistently different. When several sentences in a row have the same sentence structure, they seem monotonous and the reader can lose focus. In other words, within a paragraph, the writer should not start multiple sentences in the same way and should use a combination of complex and simple sentences.

Synthesizing information is another important stylistic technique that can be used to improve communication. To synthesize information, the writer should take a large amount of information and condense it into a more concise format. Rather than using multiple lists to convey ideas, the writer should combine those comments into a logical format. For example, if multiple articles suggest that after-school programs provide benefits to youth, rather than going through a description of each individual article and the benefits found, the writer should simply state that after-school programs contribute to the positive development of children, state how they contribute, and support that sentence by listing the appropriate sources. If there are certain articles that need more explanation to support the author’s ideas more completely, then they should be discussed individually. But, for the most part, a synthesis of ideas

will hold the attention of the reader better and, therefore, will be a more effective communication tool.

The use of quotes is related to the technique of synthesizing information. Writers frequently overuse quotes, which can impact the communication of the intended message. It is easy for a writer to believe that another person said something so perfectly that it can never be improved. While that is sometimes the case, especially with definitions, most often it is better to paraphrase the information. This is connected to the original intent of what is being written. If the intent is to communicate a person's knowledge to another individual, having someone else say it does not make a lot of sense. What would make sense is for the writer to explain someone else's thoughts to the best of his or her ability. In addition, anytime quotes are used, they should be properly introduced and explained. Having quotes randomly placed in a paper without an explanation of why they are there and how they connect to the rest of the paper can be confusing. Instead, if using a quote is necessary, the writer should take the time to properly introduce what was said and its relationship to the text both before and after it. This will likely also involve an explanation of what was quoted. For example, when looking for advice on using quotations, the writer might consider the words of Samuel Palmer: "Wise men make proverbs, but fools repeat them." This suggests that while the information stated by others may be of high quality, it is best for writers to not recite it verbatim in their own writing.

Finally, for students to improve their writing, they should remember that the majority of good writing is simply good rewriting. Writing should be thought of as an art that needs to be practiced again and again to improve. Far too often people will say that they are not good writers and never will be. They initially struggle to put words down on paper and then become upset when what they have written is not perfect. The reality is that it is much easier to rewrite something that is already written, so the writer should not worry about making a statement perfect the first time; they should just write something. After the idea is initially written, a good writer will continue to work with it until it is structured grammatically and stylistically in the way that best portrays the intended concept or argument. In short, the individual who learns the art of rewriting will be the most effective in communicating his or her ideas.

While in the iterative rewriting process, the writer should look at word usage. It might be easy to simply use spell check to make sure there are no misspelled words, but one thing spell check does not ensure is that words are used correctly. For example, in a risk management class, I recently had a student turn in an assignment that discussed controlling for "wild beers" in a wilderness environment. While there is a potential that the student was actually concerned about protecting people from wild beers, he was more likely concerned about bears and unintentionally provided an example of relying on spell check rather than proofreading adequately.

To ensure proper word usage, the writer should have another person read through what is written. Authors generally know what they intend to say and will often interpret their writing that way regardless of how it is actually written. Someone less familiar with the work can usually spot unclear portions, inconsistencies, and errors much more quickly and then bring them to the author's attention. For this manuscript alone, each of the three authors has read it multiple times, and each time mistakes were found that needed to be corrected. Furthermore, there is a good chance that there is still more that can be improved. There is no guarantee that a proofreader will

catch everything, but he or she is still likely to make significant improvements to the document.

The very last step in the writing process has very little to do with actual writing and everything to do with professionalism. In all written documents, neatness counts. The way the work is presented may have very little to do with the content, but it has everything to do with how the content is perceived. Writing is about communicating, and just like the way we hold our head or cross our arms communicates ideas to others nonverbally in a conversation, the presentation of written work also provides a message. If a document clearly has not been proofread or has sloppy formatting, those who are reviewing it may perceive that the author does not care about it, so why should they? Others may look at it as a lack of attention to detail and make assumptions that the author lacks attention to detail in other areas as well. In multiple cases, I have known reviewers of manuscripts who have automatically rejected a potential article for these very reasons, and the same can be assumed of the reviewers in writing in many other areas relevant to parks and recreation professionals including job applications and grant submissions.

To make sure written work is taken seriously, authors should carefully present the best product possible. This includes following whatever format is required (in our field it is frequently the APA guidelines; American Psychological Association, 2009) throughout the entire text. If no specific format is required, the writer should be consistent in formatting issues that might be presented including capitalization, headers, titles, spacing, and referencing. The writer must ensure that all citations in the text are properly referenced and vice versa. Not having matching citations and references not only is a sign of sloppy workmanship, but also can signal a potential plagiarism issue.

In summary, good writing does count and makes a difference in how we convey our ideas and, ultimately, how others perceive us as professionals. When writing is sloppy, informal, and not well thought out, we provide a description of ourselves as unprofessional. Being able to understand the difference between informal and formal writing and when it should be used is not only important but also necessary in our profession. We, as professors, need to move away from the assumption that students enter the classroom with good writing skills. Instead, we should embrace the opportunity to guide students in the writing process and teach them how to convey messages appropriately, both in the classroom and when they enter the profession. Not only is it part of our job, but also it is our responsibility to the future of our field.

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