

The Missing Link between School and Work: Knowing the Demands of the Workplace

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It was Tuesday. High school English teacher Karen Miller was driving to work, sipping on a cup of coffee. Her blue Honda Civic hummed its way along in the middle lane of the divided highway. In the background, her favorite radio station played music as she mentally rehearsed the day's lesson. From out of nowhere, a car sped up behind her, dangerously coming within inches of her rear bumper, then it careened to the right and passed her. She watched as the car shot ahead, swerving in and out of traffic. "Menace," she murmured under her breath. Suddenly, in her rear view mirror, she noticed a police car. The patrol car

passed her on the left and sped up to the erratic motorist, who by now was far ahead. The officer turned on his flashing lights, ordering the motorist to pull over. Traffic slowed. By the time Karen's car passed, the motorist was standing outside his car, legs spread, hands on top of the vehicle. She caught the glint of handcuffs in the officer's hands.

For many people, the image of a police officer is guns and glory, high speed chases, and arrests. This is the Hollywood version. What people *don't* see is the officers filling out all the forms and writing the reports that accompany every arrest, every traffic stop, every call for help. Police work, like so many other occupations, has hidden job requirements that need to be uncovered. When they are made known, students and job seekers will find that language arts skills are prerequisite for nearly every occupation. The problem is that many prerequisite skills remain hidden until the worker is actually on the job. For students, the link between school and work is unclear.

High school English students sometimes come right out and ask, "Why do we have to learn this stuff?" My answer used to be that they would need it later in life, that it was a life skill. I knew my answer was glib, that it sounded much like a fairy tale. I knew that in my own career as a teacher I used

all of the language arts skills on a daily basis. I suspected that employees in other occupations did, too, but the missing link was the hard data to prove it. What *are* the language arts demands in different occupations? How much time do workers spend reading and writing? Who is their audience? What are the quality standards? My questions far outnumbered my answers.

A Survey across Occupations

To obtain more detailed data about the reading and writing demands of a variety of occupations, I paired with Jerry Ballestreri, Coordinator of Vocational Technology at the Martin Luther King Jr. Career Center in Anchorage, Alaska. We designed a survey that asked workers about the type and quantity of reading and writing in the workplace, as well as details related to quality standards. Ballestreri was interested in the information because he had heard complaints from the business community that schools were inadequately preparing students to meet the demands of the workplace. I wondered if knowing these demands would help me design a better curriculum for my students.

We distributed approximately 150 surveys. One hundred ten surveys (73 percent) were

returned, giving us a high confidence rating. We deliberately distributed the surveys among workers at three skill levels: (1) *entry level positions* requiring no more than one year's training beyond high school; (2) *skilled positions* requiring two to four years of training beyond high school but no degree; and (3) *professional positions* requiring a four-year degree or higher. The number of respondents at each level was 35, 34, and 40, respectively, and, while the lists are too lengthy to reproduce here, a short version serves to illustrate the diversity of occupations surveyed.

From the *entry level* positions we heard from a stock clerk, bookkeeper, hair salon owner, bartender, septic pumper, receptionist, and truck driver. In the *skilled level* category we heard from a fire inspector, nurse's aide, senior account manager, accountant, dental assistant, chief news photographer for a television station, and delivery service supervisor. Representing *professional level* occupations were a high school principal, dental hygienist, auditor, pediatrician, university professor, church pastor, federal meteorologist, and special education visual interpreter.

The survey provided us with concrete data, which is presented in the sidebar. Results pertaining to reading are given first, followed by those for writing. Bulleted items are listed in rank order, with the highest ranking item listed first. For the sake of brevity, items receiving only a few responses are not listed.

An In-depth Look into Police Work

The opening of this article described a routine traffic stop by an on-duty police officer. If we were to look more closely at the demands of police work, what would we find?

Training for police work begins in the police academy. In addition to the many skills that officers learn in order to handle the physical and psychological demands of their profession, special attention is given to language arts skills in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. Police officers must read and study laws, codes, and regulations. They must be able to speak well in court, conduct interviews, and interrogate witnesses and suspects. They must be good listeners, not only to the words spoken, but to tone of voice and clues that might indicate whether or not the person is telling the truth. They must have extraordinary powers of

observation. Officers must be able to read body language, recognize makes and models of vehicles, read license plates at a distance, and much more. In the area of writing, officers must fill out a wide variety of forms and compose detailed written reports. Their reports must be good enough to withstand the scrutiny of lawyers and judges in a court of law.

I had the opportunity to study the composing process of police officers in Springfield, Oregon, a small city with fewer than 50,000 residents. I rode for an entire shift on multiple occasions with four different police officers. I was able to observe what they wrote, how often they wrote, how that writing was accomplished, and how they self-corrected their work, and I gathered the following information.

Writing Conditions

The conditions under which these men and women write their reports are far from the quiet, controlled environment of the classroom. For the most part, officers write inside their patrol cars. Some cars are equipped with computers. When they are not, the officers write reports by hand, scrunched behind the steering wheel of the car. They are often interrupted to go out on another call, but even when their writing time is not interrupted, they are constantly maintaining surveillance of their surroundings. For safety, they frequently back their car against a well-lit building so no one can surprise them from behind. Police aren't just out there protecting others; sometimes they are the ones under attack.

Format

Police reports fall basically into two formats: forms and supplemental reports. Forms are designed for specific types of situations. I collected forms for bicycle thefts, incident/custody reports, vehicular accidents, alcohol influence, intoxilyzer breath test equipment checklists, affidavits of probable cause, jail bookings, and others. The forms are designed to shortcut the amount of writing required. They feature labeled areas that require only a word or two to complete and boxes that may be checked off as needed. Supplemental reports are detailed narratives. The time, date, name of officer, and case number are always included. The first part of the report tells what they are investigating—an accident, a burglary, a fight, or other incident. The second part of the report details their observations, and the third part of the report tells what actions were taken.

A Survey of Reading and Writing in the Workplace

Occupational Reading

Types of Reading

- professional memos and letters (including e-mail)
- charts, tables, and schedules
- policy and procedure documents
- technical reports and manuals
- professional journals
- professional texts and reference books
- legal documents
- surveys

Purposes for Reading

- looking for specific information or details
- keeping up with new information in the field
- collecting information to communicate with colleagues or outside personnel
- getting the big picture and/or seeing trends
- checking for errors
- collecting information to communicate with general public
- looking for cause/effect

Amount of Reading

Number of Respondents	Time Spent Reading
16	0–15 percent
28	15–30 percent
27	30–50 percent
20	50–75 percent
19	75–100 percent

Reading Speed

Very important	22 percent
Important	54 percent
Little importance	24 percent

All who responded to the survey indicated that reading speed is important. Furthermore, 92 percent of respondents reported that accuracy and reading comprehension are very important, so they are not permissible trade-offs for speed.

Occupational Writing

Types of Writing

- memos
- letters
- charts/tables/schedules
- policy and procedure documents
- technical reports and manuals
- bid specifications
- professional articles

Purposes for Writing

- share general information
- share ideas with colleagues
- compose professional letters
- compose assigned reports
- convince colleague of a new idea
- compose scientific/technical reports

Audience

- superiors
- clients/customers
- employees
- teenagers, children, and other specific populations
- general public
- trainees
- colleagues/peers
- providers of related business services

Half of all writing done on the job is in-house; the other half is sent to outside audiences.

Amount of Writing

Survey respondents placed themselves in the categories below to indicate what percentage of the workday is devoted to writing:

Number of Respondents	Time Spent Writing
25	0–15 percent
32	15–30 percent
29	30–50 percent
19	50–75 percent
9	75–100 percent

Correct Spelling, Grammar, and Mechanics

Very important	84 percent
Important	14 percent
Little importance	2 percent

No respondents claimed that spelling, grammar, and mechanics were unimportant in their line of work.

Extent of Revising and Editing

- 35 self proofread
- 22 spell-check
- 22 simple rewriting (word/sentence changes)
- 14 multiple revisions (seeking polished product)
- 4 proofread by another person
- 4 no revising or editing

Quality Standards

The standards for report writing include using a first person narrative in past tense. The officer is encouraged to use active voice, plain language, names of people instead of labels such as *victim* or *subject*, and a twenty-four-hour clock when reporting time. Officers are told to organize the report so it is easy for readers to follow, anticipate questions the reader might have and answer them in the report, and use quotes judiciously. In general, paraphrases are considered safer than direct quotes, which should be used only when the officer or witness heard them firsthand. Officers are also told to use correct spellings and adhere to the conventions of standard language use. A sloppy presentation can reflect negatively on both the officer and the content of the report.

I asked the chief of police how important it is to use correct spelling, grammar, and mechanics. He told me a story about one officer who was summoned to court to defend his report in a lawsuit. The incident involved a vehicular accident in which a female victim was thrown from the car into a ditch on the side of the road. When the officer arrived at the scene, he checked the female victim to see if she were alive and needed medical attention. She had apparently sustained injuries, so the officer asked her to lie quietly until the paramedics arrived. Because she was in shock, the officer kindly wrapped a blanket around her before continuing his investigation of the accident. In court, the lawyer asked the officer on the stand if everything in his report was true and correct. The officer stated that it was. The lawyer then presented the actual report. In it, the officer had misspelled *wrapped* as *raped*. The lawyer said the word aloud to the court. "You wrote that you *raped* the woman on the side of the road. Is this correct?" The officer, of course, denied raping the woman. The lawyer reminded the officer that he had sworn that the report was true and correct. He proceeded to say that if this portion of the officer's report were untrue, it was possible that other portions of the report might be untrue. On a spelling error, the lawyer discredited both the officer and his report.

Audience and Constraints

Police writing has a clear sense of audience—the justice system. Officers know that their reports must stand up to scrutiny and attack. They know that the reports become part of a body of data subject to legal

interpretation. Their wording must be precise. With so much at stake, it would be advantageous to have time to write careful reports, but in reality, time is

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scarce. Every action on an officer's shift must be documented. A single arrest can lead to several pages of reporting. If an officer goes out on call after call during a shift, the amount of writing can pile up rapidly. It would be helpful to write the report after each incident, while the details are still fresh, but often writing is delayed. Fatigue and stress also take their toll. By the end of a shift, the officers are not at their best, yet that is the time when many reports are written.

Writing, Revising, and Editing

Officers must proofread their own reports and do their own revising and editing. Those officers who compose on a computer have more flexibility in terms of revising than officers who compose by hand. With computer-generated reports, I observed officers using cut-and-paste as well as deletions and substitutions. Because a sloppy report is viewed negatively, there were fewer changes to handwritten reports. The officers who wrote by hand used pencils so they could erase. They also spent more time mentally composing their reports before committing them to paper.

After an officer completes a report, it is submitted to the shift supervisor, who is expected to read and approve it. If the report is not satisfactory, or if there are errors that need to be corrected, the shift supervisor has the authority to ask the officer to make revisions or corrections. The busier the shift, the more reports the supervisor must read and approve. The more reports, the more chance there is for human error; yet from the police station, the reports go directly to the district attorney's office.

Implications for Curriculum Design and Classroom Instruction

The data presented here underscore the importance of many things English teachers currently teach.

Comprehension in reading, skimming skills, and research skills are all important in the workplace. English teachers need to teach transference of skills to other content areas. For example, English students learn story and essay structure as *beginning, middle, and end*. Transferring structure skills to another domain would be to learn that scientific papers have an analogous structure: *what, how, and conclusions*. Teachers could also add speed-reading techniques to the curriculum and broaden the scope of reading skills to include charts, tables, and schedules. Teachers in other areas of the curriculum should assume responsibility for teaching reading skills pertinent to their domains.

Writing instruction should continue to focus on clarity, organization, and word precision. The data suggest that even more emphasis be given to writing for a variety of audiences and adjusting the tone and style accordingly. Teachers must continue to teach the conventions of standard English and work harder on each individual's proofreading and self-correcting skills. They can focus more attention on how to write instructions and directions, as well as how to construct charts, tables, and schedules. Letter and memo writing should be mastered before students exit high school. Synthesis of information and generalizing, two forms of higher order thinking, are important in the workplace. Teachers need to continue working with students on how to write these types of papers. Finally, time constraints and imperfect writing environments are common in the workplace, so teachers need not apologize for setting strict deadlines, regardless of circumstances.

Speaking and listening skills deserve more attention in the classroom. These include conversational skills, the ability to speak to both peers and superiors, and telephone skills. Interviewing is a hidden skill in many occupations; therefore, the teacher needs to help students learn to ask efficient questions and probe for details. Students also need to know how to answer questions orally with precision and how to listen more efficiently. They should be able to recall details of what they heard, paraphrase quotes, and pass on information accurately.

The link between school and work is strengthened by detailed data on the actual demands of various occupations. Continued research will more clearly define purposes for instruction and provide a solid rationale for teaching particular skills. Students can receive a concrete answer to the question, "Why do we have to learn this stuff?" and teachers can feel confident that their answers are backed by solid data that accurately describe real-world needs.

Works Cited

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Critical Thinking in the Classroom

"Time was when the teacher of literature insisted upon teaching her subject by means of the life of the author; today most of us realize that it is the author's philosophy as expressed in his writings that counts. It is a real philosophy that you will receive from your students if you will but give them a chance to think for themselves; incidentally, you will find yourself looking forward to reading what they have written, rather than 'dreading the stack of exams.'"

Olga Achtenhagen. "Why Is an Examination—And What of It?" *EJ* 15.4 (1926): 285-89.
