

# Entry-Level Technical Writing Skills: Managers' Expectations and Experiences

## Research questions

1. What skills should new writers have at the time of hire?
  - What expectations do academic programs set?
  - What do hiring managers expect?
2. Of these skills, what do managers find that their entry-level writers have or lack?

## Literature review

- Graduates lack skills in business operations, project management, problem solving, and scientific and technical knowledge (Whiteside, 2003).
- Managers most value skills in content development, writing, critical thinking, audience analysis, and communication strategy. Managers also value business and project management skills (Kimball, 2015).
- Managers most value skills in collaboration, writing for a specific audience and purpose, learning technology, and taking initiative in work (Rainey, Turner, & Dayton, 2005).

## Key findings

- High expectations for proficiency in writing and editing and visual and information design.

### Expectations for skills in editing and style

Expected skill level in:	No skill	Some familiarity	Working knowledge	Full proficiency	N/A
Ability to edit and proofread	0	2	3	6	0
Ability to use grammar appropriately	0	0	3	8	0
Ability to effectively use voice and style	0	4	3	4	0
Ability to apply style guidelines appropriately	0	2	5	4	0

- Low expectations for skills in audience analysis. Half of managers surveyed stated that employees lacked skills in this area.

### Expectations for skills in audience analysis

Expected skill level in:	No skill	Some familiarity	Working knowledge	Full proficiency	N/A
Ability to analyze the purpose of a document	1	7	1	2	0
Ability to identify primary and secondary audience	3	4	4	0	0
Ability to determine how much or little information to include	3	6	2	0	0

- Aside from identified core competencies, managers most wanted to see business and soft office skills such as collaboration, problem solving, and interpersonal communication.

*"I look for technical writers with excellent interpersonal skills, persistence, and trustworthiness. Technical writers at my company must gather information from various scientific/engineering personnel who often have many competing priorities. It is important for technical writers to feel confident asking for help, setting up meetings, adjudicating disagreements, etc. ... Technical writers must be persistent in order to see questions/problems through to solutions."*

## Research methods

- Analyzed required core courses of six undergraduate technical writing programs: University of Minnesota, Metro State University, Missouri University of Science and Technology, University of North Texas, Minnesota State University Mankato, University of Arkansas Little Rock.
- Identified nine competency areas in core courses: Research, editing and style, visual and information design, web writing, usability, audience analysis, writing and rhetoric theory, policy and procedure writing, and genre writing.
- Surveyed 11 managers of entry-level technical writers about their expectations in the nine competency areas and their actual experiences with new writers.

## Discussion

- Despite the importance that prior research places on audience analysis, manager expectations are low.
- Academic programs *and* managers need to plan to help entry-level writers develop soft office skills to complement writing skills.

## Future research

- Periodically check in on managers' expectations and experiences as the field changes.
- Determine what non-writing office skills are most relevant for technical communicators. Should these be incorporated into curricula?
- Are low expectations for audience analysis skills in this study an anomaly?

