2016

The State of Business Writing

The challenge of writing for a read-on-screen world

by Josh Bernoff

Summary

In early 2016 I conducted the WOBS Writing Survey, analyzing the experiences and attitudes of 547 business people who write at least two hours per week for work, excluding email. Only one-sixth of them identify themselves as writers or editors; the rest are business owners, executives, managers, analysts, and other professionals. They write everything from reports and marketing materials to web copy and blog posts. For these professionals, reading and writing is a full-time job; they average 25.5 hours reading and 20.4 hours writing per week.

The poor quality of what they read frustrates them. They rate the overall effectiveness of what they read at a pathetic 5.4 out of 10, and 81% report that poorly written material wastes their time. They complain that what they read is too long, poorly organized, unclear, and full of jargon.
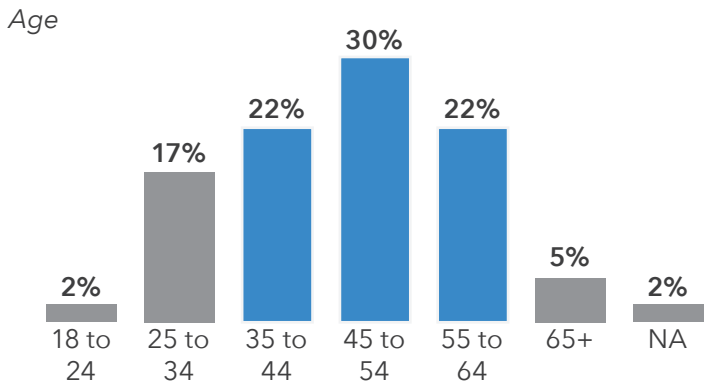
These business writers recognize problems with their own writing, too, including a lack of brevity, precision, and directness. Even so, they rate what they write higher than what they read. Two-thirds believe they make a strong positive impression with their writing. However, only 38% say their writing teachers prepared them well for writing at work, and only 32% believe their process for collecting feedback works well.

These results confirm how poorly business writing has kept up with the needs of on-screen readers. Business writers waste too much of their readers' time. To maximize clarity and impact, they must learn to write shorter, ruthlessly purge meaningless words, and take control of their review processes.
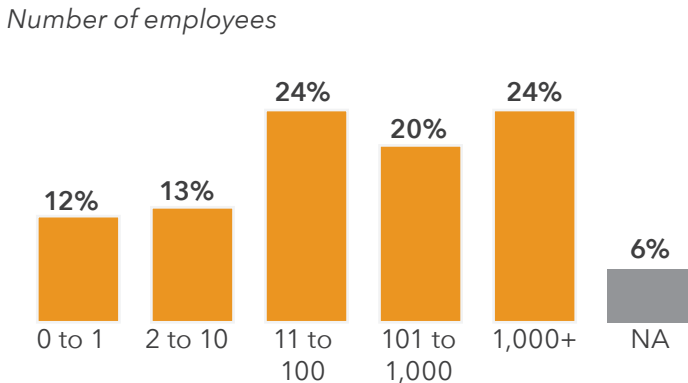
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The WOBS Writing Survey reached a diverse collection of business writers.

The survey sample included people who write in English at least two hours per week, excluding email. The respondents' jobs varied from admins to writers to business owners. Most were college graduates, with a median age of 47 and a median income of $100,000.
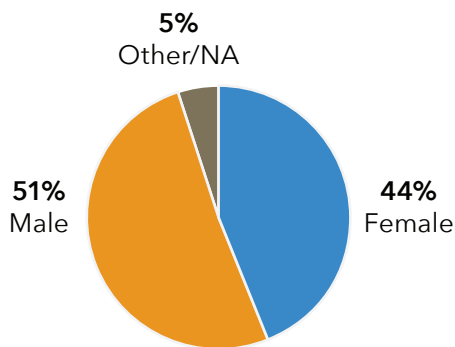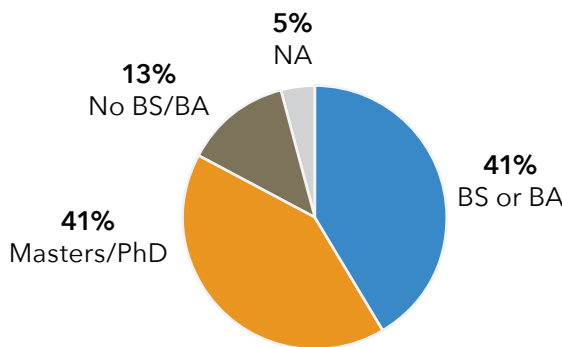
Most are between 35 and 65.

Age

Age	%
18 to 24	2%
25 to 34	17%
35 to 44	22%
45 to 54	30%
55 to 64	22%
65+	5%
NA	2%

They come from organizations of all sizes.

Number of employees

Number of employees	%
0 to 1	12%
2 to 10	13%
11 to 100	24%
101 to 1,000	20%
1,000+	24%
NA	6%

They're balanced by gender.

- 5% Other/NA
- 51% Male
- 44% Female

Writers are well educated.

- 5% NA
- 13% No BS/BA
- 41% Masters/PhD
- 41% BS or BA

Compensation varies widely.

Volunteer/intern	1%
Less than $25,000	5%
$25,000 to $49,999	10%
$50,000 to $74,999	15%
$75,000 to $99,999	12%
$100,000 to $149,999	16%
$150,000 to $199,999	7%
$200,000 or more	7%
No answer/not paid in $	26%

They represent diverse industries.

Industry	% of respondents
Telecom, technology, electronics	19%
Business services	14%
Advertising & marketing	13%
Education	12%
Nonprofit	6%
Government	5%
Finance & financial services	4%
Healthcare & pharmaceuticals	4%
Other industries/no answer	24%

Only one in six is a writer or editor.

Title	% of respondents
Manager/director/supervisor	29%
Owner/executive/corp. officer	16%
Analyst/consultant	16%
Writer/editor	16%
Other professional	15%
Other non-manager	4%
No answer	3%

One in three is in marketing or PR.

Department	% of respondents
Marketing	27%
Public relations	6%
Research & development	7%
Other department	31%
Not specified	29%

Reading and writing is a full-time job.

People who write for work average 25.5 hours reading per week, plus another 20.4 hours writing.
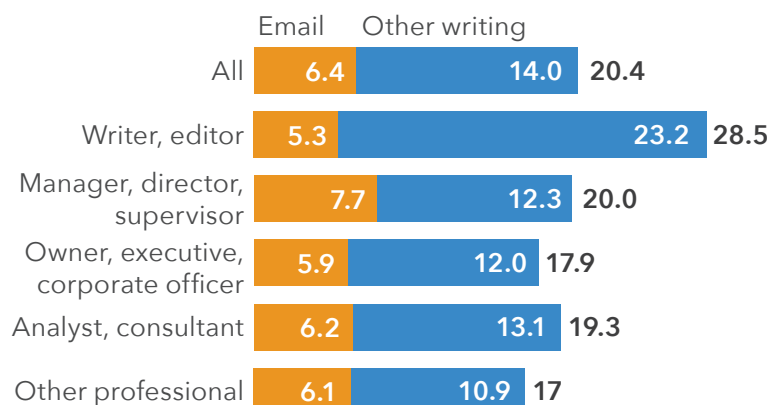Email accounts for 34% of reading and writing time.

Email swallows up managers' reading time.

Hours spent per week reading

Email   Other reading

	Email	Other reading	Total
All	9.3	16.2	25.5
Writer, editor	8.4	18.5	26.9
Manager, director, supervisor	11.1	15.3	26.4
Owner, executive, corporate officer	8.6	16.7	25.4
Analyst, consultant	8.8	15.4	24.2
Other professional	8.4	16.3	24.7

Writers and editors write the most, 28.5 hours per week.

Hours spent per week writing

Email   Other writing

	Email	Other writing	Total
All	6.4	14.0	20.4
Writer, editor	5.3	23.2	28.5
Manager, director, supervisor	7.7	12.3	20.0
Owner, executive, corporate officer	5.9	12.0	17.9
Analyst, consultant	6.2	13.1	19.3
Other professional	6.1	10.9	17

Business writers create content for a variety of containers.

After email, our respondents were most likely to create web copy, memos, and reports. Three-quarters of managers spent time writing memos, while more than half of owners, executives, and corporate officers wrote blogs and social media posts.

Writing tasks vary by job description.

"What have you written in the last six months?"

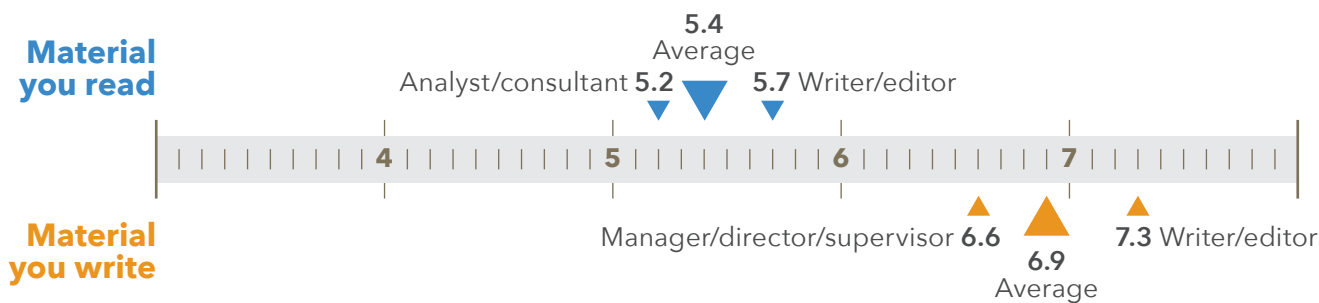|	All	Writer, editor	Manager, director, supervisor	Owner, executive, corp. officer	Analyst, consultant	Other professional
Emails	98%	94%	99%	99%	100%	100%
Web site copy	62%	84%	66%	78%	39%	46%
Memos (internal)	57%	44%	73%	46%	51%	59%
Reports (internal)	53%	33%	69%	43%	48%	60%
Tweets (for business)	49%	58%	51%	59%	50%	33%
Blog posts	48%	61%	48%	66%	40%	33%
Brochures/marketing materials	45%	57%	51%	56%	30%	31%
Facebook posts (for business)	42%	48%	41%	63%	29%	37%
Reports (external)	41%	26%	43%	56%	60%	23%
Manuals or instructions	35%	32%	39%	22%	33%	42%
Press releases	32%	37%	39%	47%	19%	20%
Speeches	25%	5%	31%	42%	22%	17%
Scripts	22%	26%	24%	30%	12%	20%

Shading indicates job description most likely to create each type of content

Writers see many problems in what they read, fewer in what they write.

Business writers judge what they read as ineffective, rating it only 5.4 on a 10-point scale. They complain that writing is too long, poorly organized, unclear, and full of jargon. Like the children in Lake Wobegon, they're apparently all above average, seeing fewer flaws in their own work.
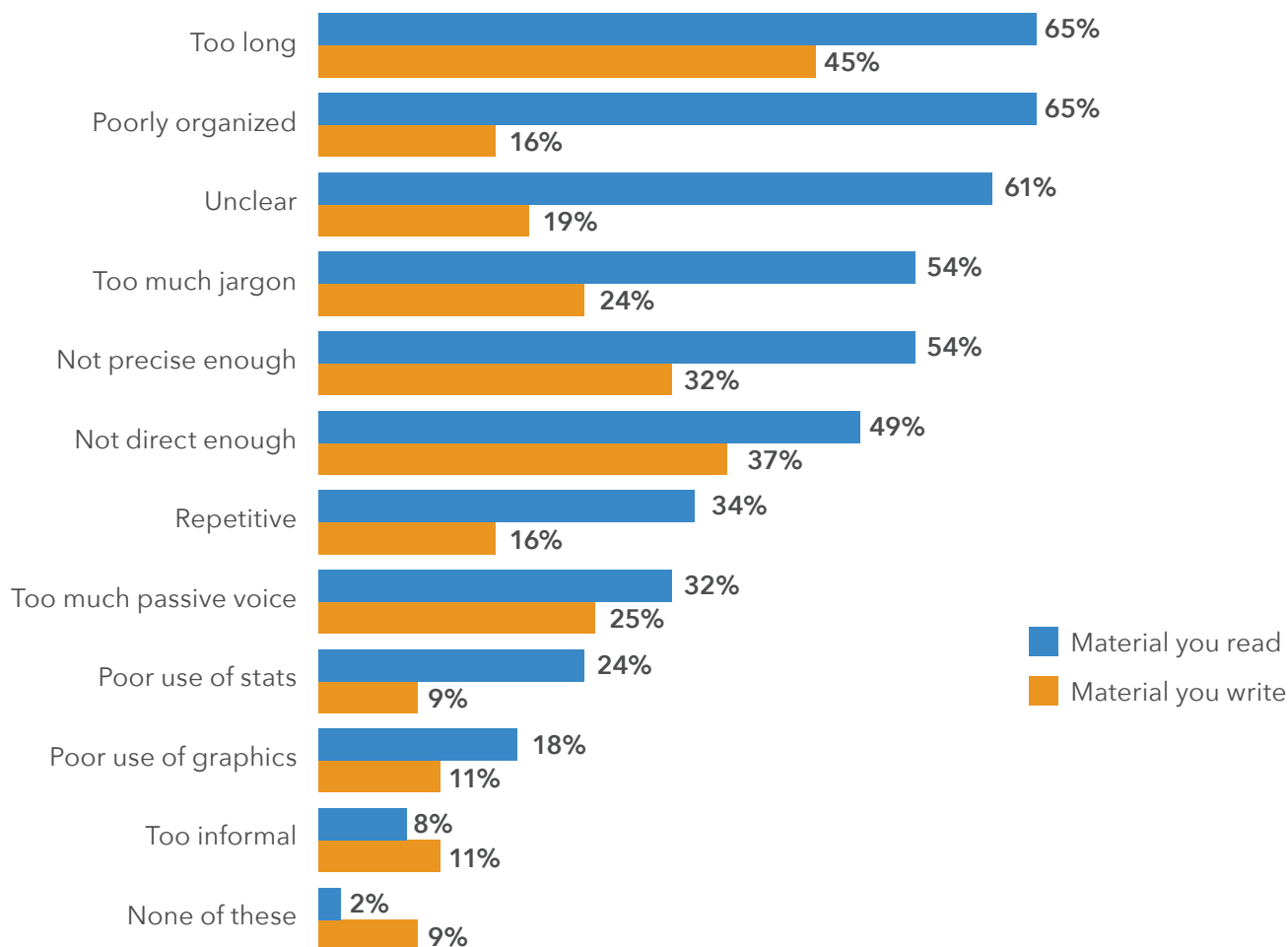
Written material is ineffective.

*"On average, how effective is the material you read/write?
Rate from 1 (completely ineffective) to 10 (completely effective)."*

Material you read

5.4 Average
Analyst/consultant **5.2**   **5.7** Writer/editor

| | | 4 | | | 5 | | | 6 | | | 7 | | | |

Material you write

Manager/director/supervisor **6.6**   **7.3** Writer/editor
6.9 Average

Text is overlong, disorganized.

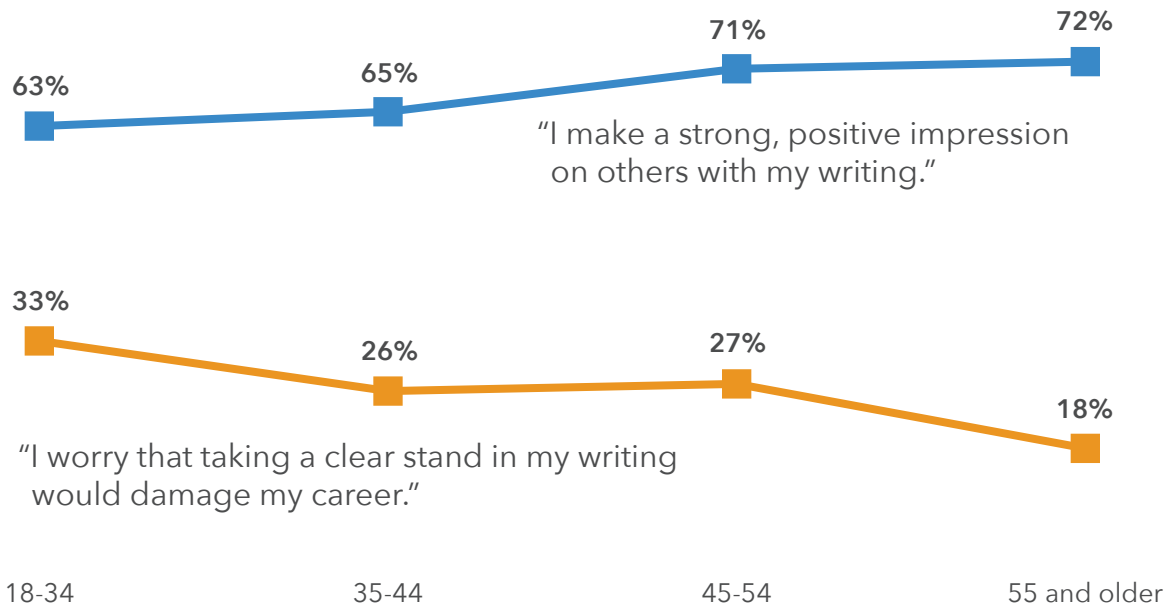*"In the material you read/write, which of the problems listed here occur frequently enough to make the material significantly less effective?"*
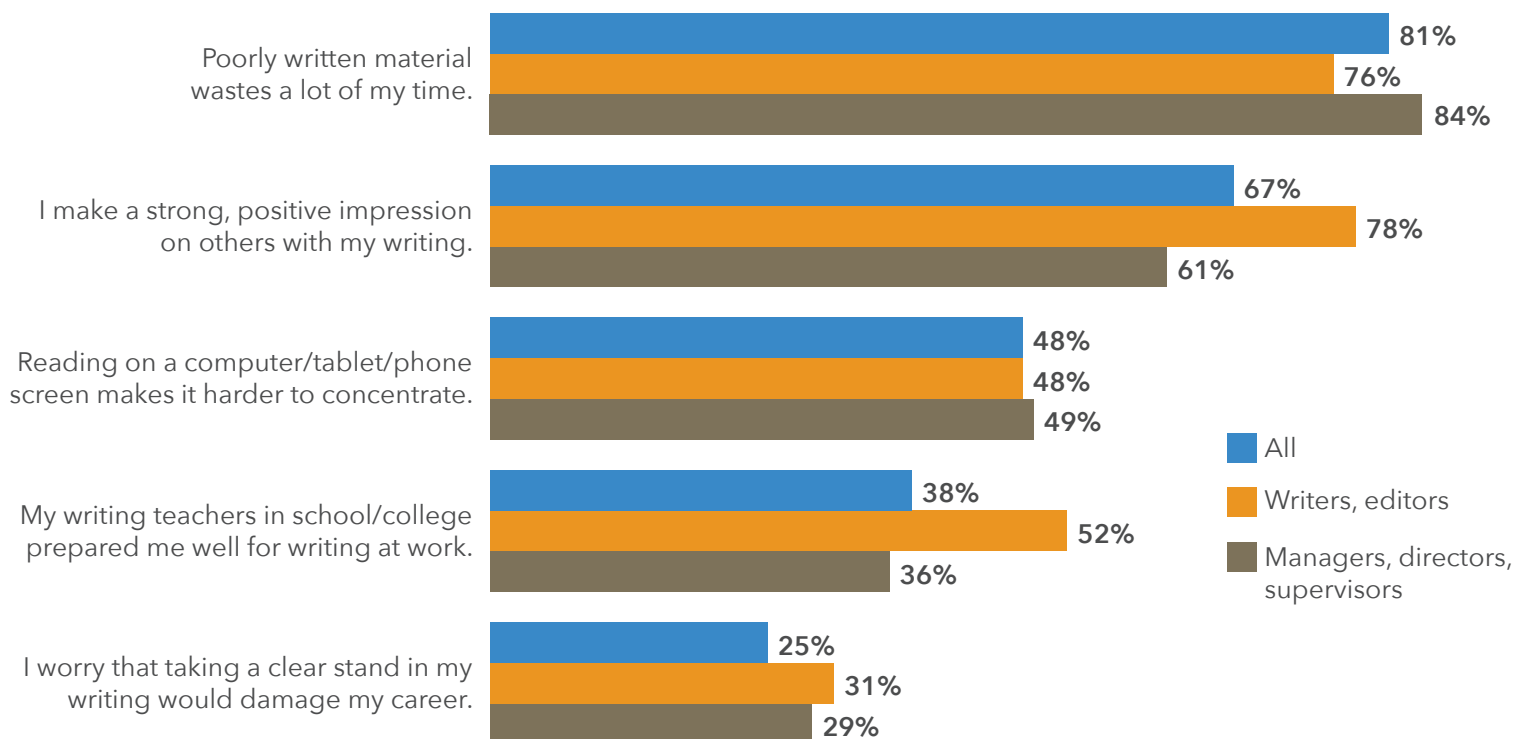
Problem	Material you read	Material you write
Too long	65%	45%
Poorly organized	65%	16%
Unclear	61%	19%
Too much jargon	54%	24%
Not precise enough	54%	32%
Not direct enough	49%	37%
Repetitive	34%	16%
Too much passive voice	32%	25%
Poor use of stats	24%	9%
Poor use of graphics	18%	11%
Too informal	8%	11%
None of these	2%	9%

■ Material you read
■ Material you write

While bold and optimistic, writers complain of poor training.

Our respondents believe their writing makes a positive impression. The older they are, the less worried they are about taking a bold stance. Nearly half worry that reading on screen impairs concentration, and only 38% feel they got the right writing training in school.

Older writers are bolder and more confident.

63%   65%   71%   72%

"I make a strong, positive impression on others with my writing."

33%   26%   27%   18%

"I worry that taking a clear stand in my writing would damage my career."

| Age | 18-34 | 35-44 | 45-54 | 55 and older |

Writers decry poorly written material and ineffective writing education.

Poorly written material wastes a lot of my time.
- 81%
- 76%
- 84%

I make a strong, positive impression on others with my writing.
- 67%
- 78%
- 61%

Reading on a computer/tablet/phone screen makes it harder to concentrate.
- 48%
- 48%
- 49%

My writing teachers in school/college prepared me well for writing at work.
- 38%
- 52%
- 36%

I worry that taking a clear stand in my writing would damage my career.
- 25%
- 31%
- 29%

Legend:
- ■ All
- ■ Writers, editors
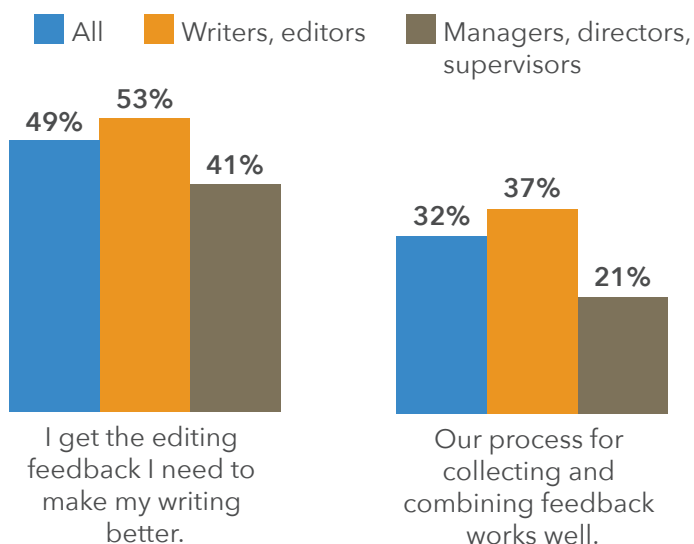- ■ Managers, directors, supervisors

Results indicate top two boxes on a 5-point Likert scale of agreement.

Despite chaotic editorial processes, writers spend limited time on rewrites.
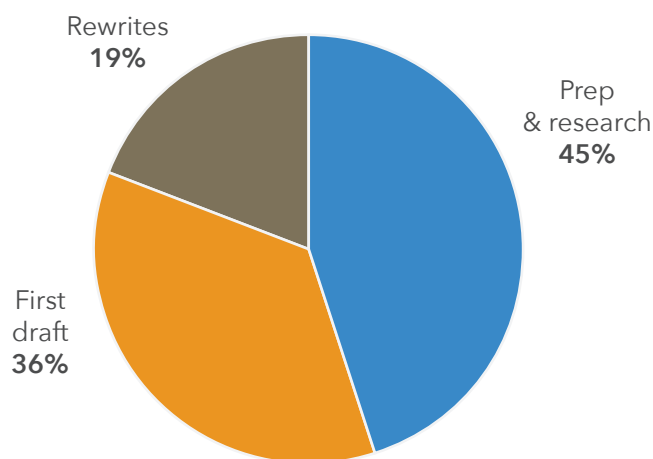
Among the writers surveyed, 416, or 76%, worked on writing projects that took at least two weeks to complete. They spent 45% of their time on prep and research, but less on rewrites. Only half said they got the editorial feedback they needed, and only one-third thought their feedback process was effective.

Editorial processes are a problem.

■ All   ■ Writers, editors   ■ Managers, directors, supervisors

49% 53% 41%
I get the editing feedback I need to make my writing better.

32% 37% 21%
Our process for collecting and combining feedback works well.

Results indicate top two boxes on a 5-point Likert scale of agreement.

Writers spend only one-fifth of their time on rewrites.

Rewrites **19%**
Prep & research **45%**
First draft **36%**

Based on responses about proportion of time spent on writing stages

Business writers want to write clearly, but face obstacles

"I approve of writing 'without bullshit' but it has infiltrated most corporate writing to the point that people don't realize that they are in fact disseminating bullshit."
Consultant, advertising/marketing

"The desire for management to include pet phrases or sayings gets in the way of clear communication."
Marketing manager, telecom/technology

"I try to fight the good fight against bloated corporate content. Sometimes I win...some days, not so much."
Marketing writer, manufacturing

"[I] have to edit [the] boss's work for jargon, unclear language, [and] passive voice."
Customer service, telecom/technology

"My biggest obstacle is the clients and convincing them that a 28-page brochure in size 9 font isn't going to be effective."
Consultant, advertising/marketing

"It's frustrating the number of people who still think that writing is more about making them sound important than having the reader understand the message(s) we are trying to communicate."
Marketer, government

Key findings and recommendations.

All writers and editors should adopt the Iron Imperative: treat the reader's time as more valuable than your own. Based on what we've seen in this survey though, business writers continue to have serious problems with quality and process, and many imagine their writing is better than it actually is.

Finding	Recommendation
Professionals spend more than 45 hours per week on reading and writing.	Focus on better writing, from email to reports, to improve corporate productivity.
Among business writers, 65% say what they read is often too long, and 45% say the same about what they write.	Make brevity in writing a key corporate value.
More than half of writers see poor organization, lack of clarity, and jargon as significant problems.	Train editors to spot and purge meaningless words and replace jargon with plain language.
Only 38% of writers say they got proper training in school. But among writers over 55, 72% say their writing makes a powerful impression.	Encourage experienced writers to train and build confidence in younger writers.
Only 49% of writers working on projects get the editorial feedback they need, and only 32% say their process for collecting and combining feedback works well.	To make writing processes more efficient, enforce discipline and deadlines on editors and reviewers.

Methodology

The statistics in this document come from the WOBS Writing Survey, which I conducted from January through March 2016. I recruited survey respondents from several sources. I emailed readers of my blog and people who signed up for a webinar on clear writing. I also recruited respondents through posts and advertisements on my blog, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook. I used SurveyMonkey to conduct the survey online and analyze the results. To be included in the sample set, respondents needed to answer all substantive questions, indicate with their answers that they write for two or more hours per week at work (excluding email), and write primarily in English. Of the 793 people who responded, 547 fit these criteria. Where I cite a statistic that says that a specific percentage of respondents believe a statement, that statistic indicates the number who checked the top two boxes on a 5-point Likert scale from "completely disagree" to "completely agree."

Where I cite statistics about subgroups, the subgroups have the following sample sizes: writers/editors, 85 respondents; analysts/consultants, 90 respondents; owners/executives/corporate officers, 90 respondents; managers/directors/supervisors, 160 respondents; other professionals, 82 respondents. The statistics on page 6 come from the 416 respondents who reported working on a project that lasted more than two weeks within the last year.

Because of the way in which I recruited the respondents in this survey, they do not represent a random sample of American business professionals—the sample is biased toward people who are more concerned about the quality of writing at work. If this were a random sample, then statistics based on a sample this size would have a margin of error of plus or minus 5% (at a 95% confidence level).
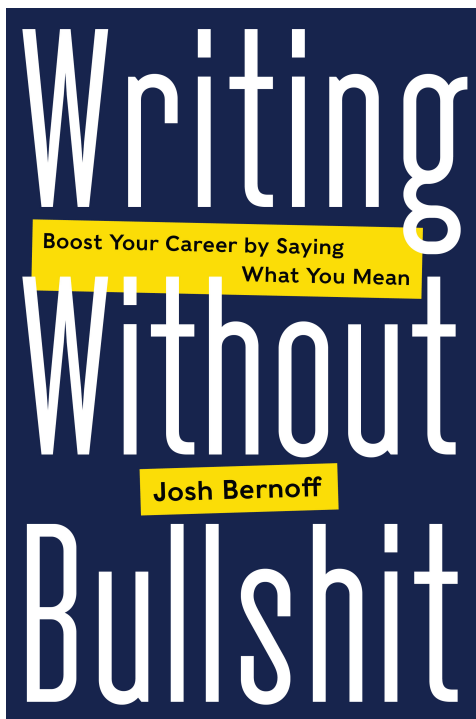
About Josh Bernoff

I've been a professional writer for 34 years and have authored or coauthored four books. *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies* (HBR Press, 2008) was a bestseller.

I spent 20 years as an analyst at Forrester Research, where I was senior vice president, idea development. Since then, I've dedicated myself to eradicating bullshit in corporate America.

Learn more

Seeking battle-tested writing tips on reports, email, and blog posts? Learn how to write bold, clear, powerful pieces that generate action.

Subscribe to my blog at **bernoff.com** for daily tips and commentary on effective business writing.

My new book *Writing Without Bullshit: Boost Your Career by Saying What You Mean* is available September 2016. See bernoff.com/book.

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