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In their own words: A thematic analysis of students' comments about their writing skills in mass communication programs

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Abstract

This study explored student self-perceptions of writing skills in mass communication programs at thirteen public state universities in the Mid-Atlantic region. Responses to three open-ended questions revealed heavy student concern with their basic skills, a desire for extensive faculty contact and feedback, and for many respondents, an immaturity or naiveté regarding professional standards. This study addresses implications for faculty members who wish better understand their students in order to devise more effective writing instruction.

Keywords: writing, writing apprehension, writing self-efficacy, thematic analysis

Skilled writing has always been a key requirement in the public relations profession. As employers continue to demand skilled writers, university programs have responded with coursework preparing students for the professional workplace. Yet, many media employers find recent graduates lacking in fundamental writing skills. In a 2008 survey of 120 diverse American corporations, Cole, Hembroff and Corner (2009) found significant dissatisfaction with the writing performance of entry-level public relations practitioners. The Commission on Public Relations Education (2006) identified skills in writing, critical thinking and problem-solving as major deficiencies in entry-level practitioners. According to Lingwall (2011), college media writing instructors have reported similar deficiencies in students.

Recent literature offers an unflattering view of writing skills among the millennial generation of college students. Manzo (2008) wrote that only small pro-

portions of middle and high school students showed proficiency in writing – use of proper spelling and grammar, along with more sophisticated skills needed to write essays or explain complex information. Scholars including Turner (2009) established links between students' increasing use of technology and a general decline in writing skills. Bauerlin (2008) has referred to millennial students as “The Dumbest Generation,” believing they are immersed in technology that “dumbs down” their writing skills. A 2006 survey of college professors by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* confirms a belief that college writing skills are declining. Similarly, in Lingwall's 2011 study, mass communication professors reported teaching many new students only moderately proficient in writing. Reports focused on deficiencies in critical thinking, paragraph and sentence structure, grammar and punctuation, and proofing and editing.

While there is general consensus that

media writing skills are weak among current students, a solution to the problem has not yet been offered. To craft new instructional approaches to improve writing skills, it is important to uncover the ways in which our students perceive their own media writing skills and the task of media writing. This study explores what our students think and feel about their writing skills.

Review of Literature

To better understand the task of writing from the student's perspective, four areas of writing perception have been offered as measurement constructs: writing apprehension, writing self-efficacy, writing approaches, and social media writing competence.

Theoretical Approaches

Two theoretical frames have served as foundations of research in JMC studies of student's perceptions of writing: writing apprehension (Daly & Miller, 1975; Riffe & Stacks, 1988) and writing self-efficacy (Collins & Bissell 2002). Writing apprehension focuses on fear of writing tasks. Writing self-efficacy focuses on self-perceptions of ability in writing. A third area of theoretical interest is based upon writing approaches (Lavelle & Guarino, 2003) and focuses on the perceived use of writing strategies. Together, these three theoretical areas of writing self-perceptions fit the traditional tripartite attitude dimensions (Ajzen, 1989). Writing apprehension refers to an affective domain set of perceptions – feelings about writing. Writing self-efficacy concerns self-perceptions of performance ability in writing, or the behavioral (conative) dimension. Writing approaches reveal the cognitive domain of self-perception, or how we perceive our strategies as writers.

Writing apprehension. Daly and Miller (1975) identified writing apprehension as a deterrent to acquisition of writing skills. Beginning in 1988, Riffe and Stacks expanded Daly's work into journalism education, focusing on writing apprehension as a multidimensional construct that included seven factors of writing apprehension in journalism and mass communication students: general affect, blank-page paralysis, mechanical skill competence, career and essential skills, evaluation apprehension, task avoidance, and facts versus ideas (1992).

Writing self-efficacy. Collins and Bissell (2002) defined writing self-efficacy as one's perception of his or her ability and achievement in writing. This construct grew out of the theoretical framework developed by Bandura (1986) focusing on the influence of self-perception and attitudes in learning efficiency. Researchers including Pajares (2003) explored dimensions of perceptions of writing ability across college and K-12 learning environments. In a range of studies, writing self-efficacy was correlated with writing outcomes, writing anxiety and writing apprehension, grade goals, depth of processing, and expected outcomes. Identified as a motivation construct, writing self-efficacy was also used as a pretest of performance. Collins and Bissell later adopted this construct to measure writing self-efficacy of journalism and mass communication students.

Writing approaches. Lavelle and Guarino (2003) constructed a measurement of college writers' perceptions of the processes they undergo to complete a writing task. This theoretical framework focuses on a relationship between the student's intentions during writing and choice of writing strategies, which subsequently affect writing outcomes. All writ-

ers are said to rely upon strategies, which vary between novice and expert writers. Strategies are linked to beliefs about writing and writing ability. These researchers make a basic distinction between “deep” writing (making new meaning and insight) and “surface” writing (largely reproductive and reiterative).

In the same study, Lavelle and Guarino (2003) identified five factors of student writing approaches: elaborationist (active engagement of audience), low self-efficacy (based on self-doubt), reflective revision (to remake or rebuild one’s thinking), spontaneous/impulsive (surface strategy), and procedural writing (adherence to rules). Elaborative and reflective revision are identified as representing a deep approach to writing. Lavelle and Guarino concluded that instruction should create learning environments emphasizing a deep approach to writing.

Theoretical Summary

This study explores three levels of self-perception of writing. The cognitive dimension is represented by approaches to writing. Approaches to writing refer to the perceived use of cognitive strategies to accomplish writing tasks. Deep writers use sophisticated cognitive strategies. Surface writers employ either no strategies or impulsive approaches. The affective dimension is represented in our study by writing apprehension, a generalized fear of writing. This fear is marked by task avoidance, feeling lost, and a fear of evaluation. The important behavioral dimension of self-perceptions of writing is represented by writing self-efficacy, or self-perception of writing performance ability.

Method

This study sought to discover what

students believe has most helped their progress as writers, what students believe has most hindered their progress as writers, and what students wish their instructors knew about their writing skills in their communication program.

During September 2012, researchers administered a paper survey questionnaire to 860 anonymous students enrolled in communication courses at thirteen comprehensive state universities in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The instrument contained three sections with check-off and Likert-type items to determine demographic information and student self-perceptions of writing skills. The last part of the survey asked three open-ended questions: (1) In your opinion, what in your communication program has most helped your progress as a writer? Please explain. (2) In your opinion, what in your communication program has most hindered your progress as a writer? Please explain. (3) What is the one thing that you wish your communication instructors knew about your writing skills? The three open-ended questions formed the basis of this qualitative narrative analysis.

This study employed thematic narrative analysis to examine the answers respondents provided to the three open-ended questions. As described in Reismann (2008), thematic analysis is used to derive thematic categories from narratives provided by respondents.

The survey was completed by 860 students with nearly a 100 percent response rate. Noted demographics included university, year in college, major, concentration, gender, and ethnicity. Among respondents, 41% (n = 352) were male and 57% (n = 490) were female. Regarding class standing, 33% (n = 284) were freshmen, 28% (n = 240) were sophomores, 23% (n = 197) were juniors, and 15.5% (n = 134) were seniors. Regarding

major, 68% (n = 588) indicated they were communication majors, and 30% (n = 260) said they were non-majors. Regarding concentration within the major, 23% (n = 198) indicated broadcast media. Fully 15% of students (n = 127) indicated public relations, while 3.5% (n = 30) indicated advertising. Finally, 7.5% (n = 64) of participants indicated journalism. A total of 6% (n = 53) indicated general communication. A total of 45% of respondents (n = 388) did not indicate a concentration.

Respondents were somewhat diverse in terms of their ethnic backgrounds. A total of 74% (n = 635) indicated white, 13.5% (n = 114) indicated African-American, and 5% (n = 44) indicated two or more races. Another 1.5% (n = 12) indicated Asian, and another 2% (n = 15) indicated American Indian. A total of 2% of respondents (n = 18) indicated Hispanic or Latino. Another 1% (n = 9) declined to state their ethnicity, and four students indicated "other."

Results

Out of the pool of 860 returned surveys, 397 came from communication majors who wrote coherent answers to at least one of the three open-ended questions. A total of 145 respondents indicated they were male, 241 indicated they were female, and 11 did not indicate gender. Regarding ethnicity, 299 students indicated they were white, 69 indicated they were African-American, nine Hispanic, four Asian, seven indicated two or more races, and nine declined to answer.

Thematic analysis revealed a clear set of answer categories for each of the three questions:

RQ 1: In your opinion, what in your communication program has most helped your progress as a writer? Please explain.

Coursework. When considering what

in their communication program had helped their progress as a writer, 120 students listed helpful courses they had taken in mass communication (for example, media writing, public relations writing, news writing, news reporting, and broadcast writing) and other disciplines, including the basic English composition course.

The Writing Process. Forty-six students discussed helpful measures related to the writing process such as feedback from instructor or peers, opportunity to submit drafts, peer review, and learning from the draft process. Seventy-nine students listed instructional or pedagogical strategies as most helpful to their progress (review of grammar, spelling and punctuation; coverage of AP style, explanation of media formats, and various writing assignments). Four indicated currency and relevance of assignments most helped their progress.

Immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards. Ten students provided responses indicating immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards (also addressed below).

Experience with student media or outside organizations: Finally, seven students said that experience with student media or outside organizations had most helped their progress as writers.

RQ 2: In your opinion, what in your communication program has most hindered your progress as a writer? Please explain.

Coursework. Here, 32 students listed courses they had taken in mass communication and other disciplines. Most of these complaints focused on particular instructors and pedagogical styles (poor lecturing, lack of organization, or too much busy work). Other complaints centered on a lack of sufficient writing courses at their institution.

The writing process. Thirty students indicated that helpful measures connected to the writing process (feedback, opportunity to submit drafts, or peer review) were missing or lacking in their coursework. Forty-four students found fault in instructional practices they encountered, such as not enough writing assignments, assignments graded without comments and feedback, and lack of AP style instruction. Another eight students commented that technology (including social media) had hindered their progress as a writer.

Immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards. Notably, 35 students indicated a level of immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards in their responses (see below).

Work overload. Ten more students said they were overloaded with writing assignments in one or more classes.

Self-efficacy. Finally, seventeen students indicated serious concerns with their own self-efficacy or ability as writers (see below).

RQ 3: What is the one thing that you wish your communication instructors knew about your writing skills?

Skills deficits. Here, 149 students wrote about their own skills deficits (grammar, mechanics, punctuation, organization) or other cognitive problems they suffered (inability to find a topic, organize thoughts, or stick with assignment).

The writing process. Another 31 students focused on the desire for more process-oriented writing instruction (instructor feedback, ability to submit drafts, peer review).

Immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards. Fifty-two students provided responses that indicated immaturity/naiveté regarding professional standards (see below).

Self-efficacy. Forty-seven students indicated serious concerns with their own self-efficacy and ability as writers (see below).

Instructional/pedagogical help. Forty-five students wrote that they desired various types of instructional/pedagogical help (see below).

Work overload. Finally, 14 students said they were overloaded with writing assignments in one or more classes.

The researchers found one difference between students based on gender. Females tended to express stronger desire for process-related support (instructor feedback, opportunity to submit drafts, peer review). In addition, females tended to make comments focused on self-efficacy (self-criticism of writing ability). The researchers discovered no real differences by class standing or ethnicity.

Discussion

A clear and honest cry for help and individualized attention rings through many of the 397 student responses in this survey. Across all groups, students indicated a strong desire for instructor support and detailed, honest feedback supporting the writing process. Selected student comments follow.

Instructor Support

“Writing comes hard for many and easy for very few,” wrote one respondent. “If you give a hard project within writing (sic.) make sure you try to work with students, encourage them, understand that it is hard to write, and do more writing activities.”

Another student wrote, “Some people went to terrible high schools or had challenges. They are not stupid but they may need individual attention. Don't waste class time teaching everyone how a com-

ma works.”

A third student wrote, “I wish my writing would be looked at more critically. I always get papers back saying what worked well, I just wish I got more criticism so I know how to improve.” Yet another respondent said he/she disliked “Professors who provide no feedback, only a grade... you never learn what could be improved, so your skills as a whole never improve.”

Detailed, Honest Feedback

- “I had a writing prof and she would grade my research papers but barely give any feedback, and when I'd ask her about it, she'd give half-assed (sic.) answers.”
- “I wish we could submit a draft and then a final copy. Constructive criticism would be helpful in writing process also (sic.)”
- “I would love more feedback on my writing... that would help me a lot!”
- “When a professor gives my essay back and grades it harshly. I need criticism; that is how I will learn.”
- “I wish my professors would correct me more in what I'm not doing right and then show me what would be better.”
- “The lack of consistent review from the professor or peers has hindered writing in a sense. I think it would be a great idea to have more student-teacher conference days working on a paper.”
- “The one thing about the communication program is they don't go over in details (sic.) whats (sic.) wrong with your paper or ways to improve it. With the small amount of papers given, the students do not get a chance to improve their writing skills because there was no feedback. There needs to be a time where the instructors could help revise.”
- “That marks on a paper don't help me understand which errors I made, that actual feedback is needed.”
- “Writing takes time. As a student I need feedback; what do I do well, what do I do poorly?”
- “I wish they would give us more feedback because they don't tell us anything that we do right, just what we do wrong.”
- “The only thing I can think of is that I have not had as much specific feedback on my writing as I would like.”
- “The lack of coherent feedback from the instructor throughout the term... Too often are (sic.) papers never said why they are good or bad (sic.), just graded.”
- “It's hard to only hand in one hard copy of a paper when you don't know if everything is correct and what the professor wanted.”
- “The thing that has hindered my writing in my program is my professors only expect a final copy. It would be nice if we could get their opinions throughout the process almost like an editor. I wish they knew my need for more feedback on my writing.”

Another student indicated that she needed help with developing creative techniques. “The creative process is what I struggle with most. I wish the instructors would help us in some way to learn different techniques to become more creative.”

Review of Basic Skills

Many students indicated they needed significant review of basic skills, including grammar, punctuation, spelling, organization, and in finding/choosing topics. One student wrote that “probably just going over the basics again and again” had helped him progress as a writer. “You can

have all the great ideas in the world, but if you don't master the basics, it's not going to matter, because you won't be able to express those ideas in writing."

Another respondent wrote, "I never had a good writing class in high school, therefore my grammar (sic.), punctuation, and organization are not as strong as they should be. Although I feel I can write profound pieces I still lack in fundamentals."

Other students echoed similar sentiments:

- "I wish they understood more that I am still learning, rather than saying I should already know."
- "One thing I wish my instructors knew is how many different ways I've learned grammar skills through junior high, high school, and college. I wish there was a mutual way of teaching grammar and reviewing it so that the things I've learned would all be consistent."
- "Even though I hate doing it, the part that's helped me the most is reviewing the basics. It's a pain sometimes, but can also be a great reminder."
- "Learning how to more clearly convey ideas. I tend to start with a million ideas, and the comm program has given me ways to streamline them."
- "It is hard to write down your thoughts in an organized fasion (sic.). Even if we understand the theories/concepts or topic matter our writing may not always be the best reflection of what we know."
- "The AP Stylebook... it seems like a great guide to get quick help when I write. I want to make sure I'm correct."
- "That I have a hard time with grammar (sic.)."
- "I'm a bad speller."
- "I struggle with writer's block and wonder if there is a way to counter it."
- "I struggle with spelling and grammar (sic.) at times."
- "I reread and edit my work what seems like a thousand times, which in the end doesn't help me because I tend to skip over small spelling and grammar (sic.) issues."
- "Grammar isn't my strong suite (sic.)."
- "That I have a hard time understanding all the punuation (sic.). Comma's (sic.) semicolens (sic.). Instructors need to explain things better."
- "The one thing I wish my communication instructors knew about the writing challenges I face would be my bad grammar (sic.) and spelling."
- "I can't spell a lot of words correctly without looking them up."
- "I wish they know (sic.) that I have issues with commas, semi colons (sic.), modifiers, and thesis statements. I usually end up getting it, but writing often intimidates me – even though I enjoy it so much."

Faculty Encouragement

A number of other students indicated that strong connections with encouraging faculty who maintained high standards had most helped them progress as writers. "I think the strong instruction from the teachers, their personal connection, and willingness to help the students succeed really helps me progress as a writer because I know that they believe in me and are willing to help me, so therefore I believe in myself," wrote one respondent. Another said, "In the intermediate reporting class, my professor was very strict but she was also very helpful with my writing. She gave me excellent feedback and encouraged me to be creative."

Other students echoed similar sentiments:

- “I had a professor in my advanced composition class who really seemed to care about my writing skills and affected them in a positive way.”
- “Having teachers you feel comfortable working with, many kids are more willing to ask for help.”
- “The ability to contact each professor one on one without being afraid to ask questions.”
- “I need to be motivated, talked to, have my writing edited often. It makes me want to write more.”

Noting the problems that occur when instructor apathy is present, one student said, “Many times I feel the instructor gives us busy work; i.e., he or she is just as bored as I am about the assignment. The writing process becomes frustrating because I feel like the instructor doesn't care about what I am writing, if they read my writing at all...”

Low Self-Efficacy and Lack of Confidence

In their responses, a number of other students indicated low writing self-efficacy and lack of confidence in their skills. The first group of comments appeared to express a futility in attempting to improve their writing skills. “I need more understanding of the fact that I'm not a good writer,” wrote one student. “I wish they knew I am not a very strong writer,” wrote another. A third wrote that she wished her instructor knew “that everyone is not a gifted writer. There are some people that try that just don't get it.”

Some students criticized themselves as writers. “I can beat myself up over writing,” wrote one. “I'm my own worst critic,” wrote another. “So, I always want my reading to sound good and I also want my audience to enjoy what I'm writing.” A third student noted, “I wish they knew

that writing isn't for everyone. I try my hardest on writing assignments, they just never look as good on the paper as they did in my head.”

Several students expressed the great personal stress they felt as a result of their shortcomings. “The pressure to perform well can be overwhelming and can diminish (sic.) my self-esteem to the point of a nervous breakdown,” said one student. Another student noted, “I tend to break down when I'm confused or don't really understand grammar (sic.), punctuation, and organization.”

Others said that instructor judgments of their writing damaged their self-image. “I wish my instructors knew that judging my writing makes me a poor writer,” one wrote. Another respondent added, “Their judgment on my writing makes me hate writing.”

Still other respondents expressed tentativeness and uncertainty about their writing skills. “I am unsure of my work so it comes out bad in the end,” said one student. Another added, “The main challenge I face is writer's block. I am always too cautious of my ideas as I write.”

Immaturity/Naiveté Regarding Professional Practices

A considerable number of students expressed immaturity/naiveté regarding professional media practices in their responses. These responses appeared to be self-centered in nature. Some students expressed the desire to write only about topics and in styles that were personally interesting to them. In particular, students said they disliked:

- “Being given a topic instead of choosing my own.”
- “Writing about something that is not an interest to me.”
- “Having to write about topics that are extremely boring and uninteresting

leads me to hate writing.”

This group commented about what most helped their progress as writers:

- “I believe giving me less restriction and more freedom in writing helped me find my opinions and develop my writing style.”
- “Writing about things I know about. Writing about things such as social media, movies, music, TV shows, plays, and networking.”
- “The opportunity to be able to write on a topic I feel strongly about. For example, if I was given a topic about gossip entertainment, then it would be easier for me because I am interested in that topic.”
- “When I am given the opportunity to write about what I am passionate about.”
- “When I am writing I like to be excited about the topic. If I am not passionately invested in the topic it is difficult to want to do well.”

Some of these students revealed their naiveté of the media professions, and the writing skills that employers require. “(Journalism) is the very opposite on how I write as a person and as a communication major (sic.),” he/she said. “I like to write in color and with vibrance; journalism writing is very concrete and monochrome.”

One student even said he resented, “Placing a priority on writing... I don't see it as very important to my profession... I wish they knew how much I dislike it and how I don't see it as an important priority.”

Another said she disliked “the constant stress to compile thoughts, ideas and facts so that it looks good on paper to do this multiple times throughout the semester.” Two more students provided some misinformed advice to instructors: “No

one really wants to write a paper on assigned topics. Let everyone pick what they want because it would be more freeing and relaxing for the writer,” wrote one.

Another student wrote, “I believe learning about other writers and their progress most likely won't get me anywhere. Being a writer to me means being unique and able to express yourself in your own writing.”

Others appeared to resent instructor criticism and chafed at the notion of professional standards. “I think I am fine with my writing it makes me comfortable it may not be the 'A' or 'B' paper I want but it's unique because it's mine,” wrote one respondent. Other respondents indicated that the following had hindered their progress as writers:

- “Being told what to write.”
- “The thought that you must write for a good grade within certain parameters.”
- “The rules they set are stupid.”
- “Focusing on grades are not nearly as important as writing about things students are passionate about... curriculum is too rigid.”
- “Writing is more about perception about the message, not cracking down on traditional English grammar composition.”
- “It seems that everything I've written had to be a certain number of pages. I believe what your (sic.) saying should be more important than how long it is.”
- “Sometimes the writings can be too guided (sic.) and narrow in the needed outcome.”
- “Guidelines. The paper is done when I feel it in my heart, not when it meets a certain quota.”
- “In situations where creativity is in-

volved the professor's opinion is usually the top priority in getting a good grade. They are more critical on things they disagree with or have a different idea for (sic.)”

A third group of students indicated they did not enjoy writing on deadline. “I hate writing to a set limit, just let me write,” said one student. Another said, “I do not like to write under pressure.” A third wrote, “I like to take my time with writing and that usually means I finish just before it's due.” Finally, another student added, “It takes some time to write the papers they are looking for and sometimes we need more time.”

Conclusion

Nearly half of all respondents in this study reported basic skill deficits. As a result, they desire and need new approaches from instructors -- approaches that many instructors have not had to emphasize before. Based on this qualitative narrative analysis, the researchers believe that many millennial students need: 1.) personal understanding along with extensive one-on-one help from their instructors. A “mass” approach will no longer suffice; 2.) focused feedback. They want to write drafts, make corrections and then resubmit their papers; 3.) intensive work on basic grammar, spelling, punctuation, and mechanics.

These results clearly show that mass communication majors also need a focused reality check on how media professionals write and what media employers expect from them as writers. They need instruction that will help them mature into professional media writers who know what the field requires of them as writers as they begin their careers.

How are we as communication writing instructors addressing this set of issues? In a 2010 study of faculty percep-

tions of writing skills, Lingwall found that faculty were divided in their suggested approaches to addressing students' skill deficits. The first suggested approach was rigor-based: make the students toughen up or fail. However, this is not a realistic approach for most universities, and certainly not smaller programs. Very few programs have the luxury of culling out half the students who come to them. The second approach suggested by faculty members was to step back, provide support and remediation, with as much rigor as possible within their own institutions.

The bottom line is that many faculty members appear to be ignorant about the extent of students' skills deficits, and what students want to be done about it. We can no longer ignore the skills deficits of millennial students. As determined in Lingwall and Kuehn's 2013 study, nearly half of students expressed a need and desire for some remedial help with writing. We cannot afford to send them away. Therefore, help must be provided.

Lingwall and Kuehn (2013) found a high likelihood that instructors will find a divergent set of students in their writing classrooms. It is likely that instructors will teach a writing class with with some highly proficient writers, matched by almost an equal number of deficient writers. In this study, Lingwall and Kuehn found many students who said they needed remediation. Therefore, the researchers suggest using the Media Writing Self-Perception Scale (Lingwall and Kuehn, 2013) in conjunction with a Grammar Spelling Punctuation (GSP) test to provide the best study track for students. Use of the scale would enable instructors to give remediation to those who need it, and separate the proficient writers and allow them to track into advanced courses more quickly.

In remediating student writing skills,

it is essential to provide: (1) friendly accommodation, as students say they need approachable instructors; (2) a writing process that allows for continuous feedback through submission of drafts and focused instructor comments (this may require the use of graduate assistants or extra support staff); (3) complete coverage of all writing basics; (4) adequate one-on-one help to discuss self-efficacy issues with students who need it; and (5) down-to-earth, frank discussion of media professions and media professionalism. Students need to know they can attain the level of proficiency in writing that can grant them access into the media professions.

A recent review of the number of mass communication majors (Becker, 2013), shows a slight decline in students enrolled in journalism and mass communication programs. Could this be occurring because millennials do not accept the centrality of professional writing in the mass communication field? Could it also be that the need to learn professional writing makes the communication major less desirable to millennial students? While the answers to these questions will require more focused research, we must make sure that we open gateways to millennial students to help them see they can become mature communication professionals who enjoy writing and are comfortable with writing for the media professions.

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