

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR WRITING SKILLS: MYTH AND REALITY

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ABSTRACT

There are many reasons why college-level students often do not possess college-level writing skills. This study investigated two of them: (1) students do not believe that good writing skills will be important to them in their careers, and (2) students perceive that they are already good writers (when in fact they are not). To test these hypotheses, we collected demographic information, self ratings of writing ability, and three independent writing-skill assessments of 140 students enrolled in various classes at the authors' university.

The evidence from our sample data refutes the argument that students do not believe writing skills are important. All (100%) of our survey participants thought that "writing ability" was likely to be "very important" or "somewhat important" to their future careers, and 96% of these individuals indicated that their writing abilities were likely to affect the way others perceived their intelligence, knowledge, or other capabilities. Thus, if students are poor writers, it is not because they think "good writing skills" will be unimportant to their careers or to the way others perceive them.

A second objective of our study was to determine how students perceived their own writing abilities. A survey question provided a partial answer to this question. On it, the majority (135 students or 96% of the respondents) rated themselves as "average" or above, while only a tiny minority (5 students or 4% of the respondents) rated themselves as "poor." To determine the extent to which these ratings were accurate, we also obtained three objective measures of these students' writing abilities—a score on a grammar test, a score on a vocabulary test, and a score on an actual writing assignment. The average scores on the first two assessments—66% for the grammar test and 50% for the vocabulary test—were disappointing both for their low values and the low skill levels required to answer the underlying test questions. Students did better on their writing assignments, achieving an average score of 82%.

Finally, we searched for a relationship between our students' ratings of their writing abilities and their performance on these independent measures of these abilities. Our statistical analyses found little or no relationship between our students' self ratings and any of these measures. The simple conclusion is that students are unaware of their own writing deficiencies, and that their perceptions of their writing abilities were inflated.

Note to readers: Complete copies of the paper are available from the authors.