



# Writing Skills Among Undergraduate Communication Disorders Students

Jessica Sayre, Mary Weidner, & Craig Coleman  
Marshall University  
Huntington, West Virginia



## Background

The ability to write proficiently is a critical skill for success in higher education and in many professional careers. However, an increasing number of undergraduate students lack the fundamental knowledge and skills required for strong written communication (Kellog & Whiteford, 2009). Specifically in higher education, there has been a documented decline in students' writing skills and abilities over the past several decades. Evidence has shown decline in writing may be due to a variety of factors such as changes in academia, grade inflation, etc. (Carter & Harper, 2013).

Although this issue is pervasive across many academic disciplines, it is particularly important for Communication Disorders (CD) students to possess strong writing skills not only for their academic success, but also their clinical future. Faculty members in the CD department at Marshall University have reported overall weak writing skills among undergraduate CD students, which are a barrier to students' academic and clinical success. Beyond classroom assignments, however, students' writing abilities have not been formally measured.

## Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to gain a more complete understanding of undergraduate CD students' writing skills through their own self-report. Specifically, it aimed to: (a) investigate student's perceived academic writing ability, (b) investigate student's perceived field-specific (clinical) writing ability, (c) measure students' attitudes toward writing, and (d) measure student's access to and use of writing resources. It is hoped information from this study can lead to appropriate and effective writing interventions.

## Methods

An anonymous survey was distributed to undergraduate students in the Department of Communication Disorders at Marshall University. Frequency data were analyzed from the 103 participants (Freshman:  $n = 22$ , Sophomores  $n = 24$ , Juniors  $n = 22$ , Seniors  $n = 33$ ). On a 4-point Likert scale, students rated various aspects of writing, use of resources to improve writing, and types of writing instruction they may find useful. The rating scales included statements ranging from poor to excellent, strongly disagree to to agree, never to frequently, and not at all beneficial to very beneficial. Following the online survey, the students were asked to complete a proofreading and editing task of a written paragraph. Analysis of that portion of the survey will be reported in future studies.

## Results

Chart 1. Self-reported writing abilities by cohort, with higher scores reflecting more proficient skills.

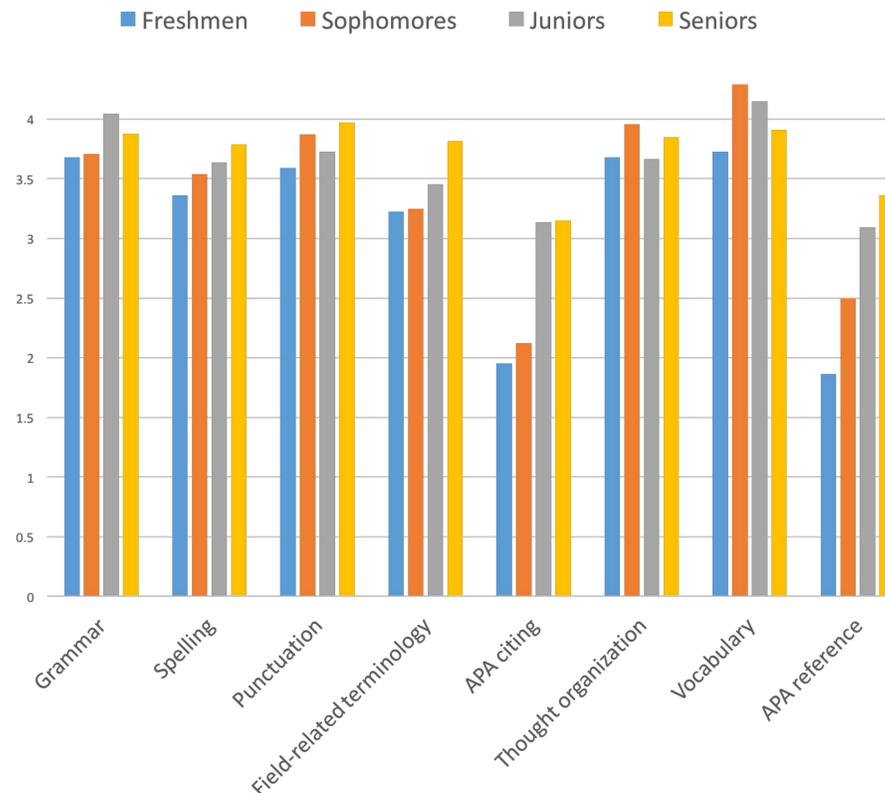
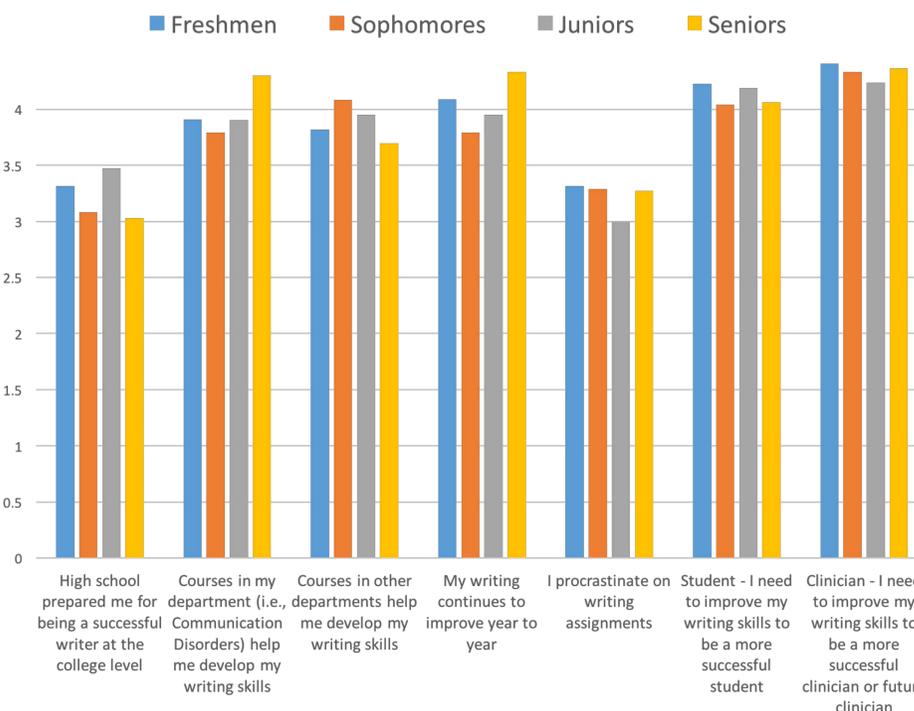


Chart 2. Self-reported writing attitudes and practices by cohort, with higher scores reflecting stronger agreement with the item.



## Discussion

Overall, students reported "average-to-good" writing skills in a majority of the general aspects of their writing (e.g., grammar, punctuation, organization). In general, students agreed or strongly agreed that they need to improve their writing skills to become a more successful student ( $M = 4.12$ ) and clinician ( $M = 4.34$ ). At the same time, they consistently reported procrastinating on writing assignments ( $M = 3.23$ ). Students identified individual instruction would be most beneficial in improving their writing skills ( $M = 3.79$ ), and books or manuals to be least beneficial ( $M = 2.67$ ).

There was a general upward trajectory of perceived writing skills across the cohorts, with a slight dip at the junior level. Differences across cohorts were further examined using a series of ANOVA's and Bonferroni post-hoc analyses. Significant differences were identified in students' APA referencing and citation abilities, knowing where to find help, and field-related terminology, with older cohorts (juniors and seniors) reporting more proficient skills than younger cohorts (freshman and sophomores). Based on the Marshall CD curriculum, it is not until the junior level that student are officially "accepted" into the undergraduate program and coursework becomes heavily discipline specific. The academic demands during junior year might lead to increased accuracy of self-reports (i.e., they know what they do not know), and therefore lower self-ratings.

Results from this study will be used to inform future writing interventions. Based on these results, it will be important to teach skills basic such as time management and APA referencing early on, so that students can grow in their ability for field-specific writing later in the program. Writing instruction should be embedded during face-to-face class meetings over the course of the undergraduate program. Moving forward, it will be useful to compare students' self-reports to instructor's perceptions and actual student writing samples.

## References

Carter, M. & Harper, H. (2013). Student Writing: Strategies to Reverse Ongoing Decline. *Academic Questions*, 26(3), 285–295.

Kellogg, R. T., and Whiteford, A. P. (2009). Training advanced writing skills: the case for deliberate practice. *Educational Psychology*, 44, 250–266.

### Disclosures & Acknowledgements

The first and second authors received financial support for this study through the Undergraduate Creative Discovery and Undergraduate Research Scholar Award. All of the authors share the copyright for the the survey used in this study. The authors would like to thank students in the Department of Communication Disorders for their participation in the study and the Marshall University Research Corporation for the funding of this study.