

Writing ability declines but still crucial for success

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At the large South Florida law firm Gunster, poor writing skills can obliterate a young lawyer's chances for a job, no matter how glittering the resume.

At Southern Adjustment Services, a car reposessor in Davie, owner Bill Mooney sees reports from employees with grammatical errors and "every single word" misspelled. At Enchanted Careers, a Lake Worth job-search company, clients — even well-educated ones — show up with [resumes](#) that misspell their own names and bristle with punctuation mistakes, incorrect capitalizations and grammar errors.



Florida students showed a dramatic drop in writing scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test released last week, results that have shaken teachers, alarmed parents and caused concern among employers. When these students enter the work force — whether straight out of high school or after earning a doctorate — they will find employers who strongly value the command of written English and are [quick](#) to reject applicants without it.

"Let's say 25 percent of students who leave a college are struggling at basic level with grammar and organization," said Jeffrey Galin, director of Florida Atlantic University's Center for Excellence in Writing. "They are not going to be able to get jobs that require written communication. And in an era where jobs are slim and employers can be picky, they are going to be relegated to manual jobs."

The old-fashioned skill of composing effective sentences and paragraphs in English turns out to be critical in an age in which everyone communicates with colleagues and customers via email and in which it's still important to produce coherent reports, memos and other documents.

Jenni Garrison, director of communications for Gunster, said lawyers who may be able to write legal briefs could come up short in other required forms, including [business](#) letters and blog posts.

"I cannot overstate the importance of being able to write, from cover letters and resumes to new business pitches and [emails](#)," she said.

At the Miami-based accounting firm Morrison, Brown, Argiz & Farra, LLC, which has offices in Fort Lauderdale and [Boca Raton](#), the skill is vital in maintaining relations with clients, said Hortensia Sampedro Hacker, the firm's [chief marketing officer](#).

"Our clients don't have the time to read book-length emails, reports and memos, and they certainly don't have the patience," she said. "So it's critical for accountants to be able to write clearly and concisely. One thinks of accounting as a numbers industry, but it's really a knowledge industry, and we need to be able to communicate our knowledge. The better our accountants write, the better the impression they make on our clients."

Concern about the deterioration of language dates at least to early medieval times, when scholars worried about the decline of Latin, which wasn't so much declining as being transformed into French, Spanish, Italian and other Romance languages. Today, the increased appearance of "bad" English represents to an extent the language's adoption of terms and styles from the world of text messages, e-mails, instant

messaging and Twitter feeds.

So Y? w% d u B =)?

(Translation: Why would you be shocked?)

"For teens, this is what they are most comfortable with, a hybrid language influenced by [technology](#) ■," said Maryann Tatum Tobin, a reading education professor at Nova Southeastern University. "So the language we ask them to write in FCAT is very different. Kids do a lot of reading and writing, but in a new medium."

But standard English remains, and until the day customers, judges, bankers, clients and other demanding audiences will want to read a row of text symbols, writing in the conventional manner will remain a vital skill.

Joyce Fine, an education professor at Florida International University in Miami, said that although language is "living and evolving," she insists her students learn to write in proper English. For example, if she gets an e-mail or text from a student that begins, "Hey, prof, R U in?" she would send it back for a rewrite.

In culturally diverse South Florida, English is a second language for many.

"Word choice is not always exact, and that leads to misunderstanding," Fine said. "But language is very telling. It is how people judge each other. And how well they can express themselves may determine if they are selected for a job."

At rbb Public Relations of Miami, president Lisa K. Ross said that texting emphasizes speed over accuracy, a deficiency that shows up in job applicants taking her firm's preliminary writing test.

"When someone does well on our writing test, we're very happy because they're few and far between," she said. "With the proliferation of texting in the younger generation, there seems to be an acceptable level of errors, so they have trouble when accuracy is required."