

Writing as a Basic Skill

"Even after accounting for the level of educational attainment, we find that those with higher basic skills have better outcomes in the job market than those with weak basic skills... Bachelor's degree holders with the strongest basic skills have the best employment and earnings outcomes" (p. 7).

"The labor market is very good at identifying and rewarding workers with stronger basic skills with employment and higher wages—and also good at relegating those with weaker skills to either no employment or to lower-paying jobs" (p. 8).

"The lesson of the last two decades is that basic skills—reading, writing, and mathematics—are the essential ingredients for labor market success...[P]rojections of employment growth in the future suggests that the role of basic skills in determining long-term labor market success will gain even greater importance in the future" (p. 8).

Fogg, N.P., Harrington, P.E., & Harrington, T.F. (2004). *College majors handbook with real career paths and payoffs: The actual jobs, earnings, and trends for graduates of 60 college majors* (2nd ed.). Indianapolis, IN: JIST Publishing, Inc.

The above quotations should convince you that writing well is important. Here are some suggestions for avoiding mistakes:

1. Make sure you're using the right contraction. Here is a handy reference:
<http://www.enchantedlearning.com/grammar/contractions/>
2. Be sure to use the correct form of a word. For example, their, there, and they're all sound the same, but they are very different. "Their" is possessive (e.g., "That's *their* house on the corner"); "there" refers to a location (e.g., "Throw the ball over *there*"); "they're" is a contraction of "they are" (e.g., "*They're* coming over to my house tomorrow"). All three words are spelled correctly, so a spellchecker won't catch mistakes-- you have to know the difference between these words and use them appropriately.
3. Keep your writing SIMPLE and use only words that are familiar to you. Using a short word is MUCH better than using a long word, especially if you use the long word inappropriately. For example, write "I was very happy about getting the job" rather than "I was exorbitant about getting the job" because "exorbitant" is misused (it means "exceeding the established limits or bounds; excessive; immoderate"; it's usually used to refer to money, e.g., "I'm not going to spend an *exorbitant* amount of money on a new car"). It would be okay to write "I was exuberant about getting the job" ("exuberant" means "full of unrestrained enthusiasm or joy" and would be appropriate in that context), but don't use a word unless you are absolutely certain that you're using the word appropriately and that it is spelled correctly. If you have any doubts whatsoever, LOOK UP THE WORD (www.merriam-webster.com or www.dictionary.com) -- that's the best way to improve your spelling and vocabulary.

Writing is a skill—skills can be improved. Here are three excellent resources:

Hacker, D. (2009). *Rules for writers* (6th ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. [www.dianahacker.com]

Lewis, N. (1978). *Word power made easy: The complete handbook for building a superior vocabulary*.

New York: Pocket Books. [This is also an excellent resource for GRE/LSAT/GMAT preparation!]

Provost, G. (1972). *100 ways to improve your writing*. New York: Mentor.