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The diverse field of professional writing: current perspectives on writing in the workplace

In 2012, Schriver reported that professionals spent an average of 24% of their workweek writing, based on data from previous research by Kirtz/Reep (1990), Mabrito (1997), McMullen/Wellman (1990), Reave (2004) and Tenopir/King (2004) (2012: 275). Workers with various roles and educational backgrounds are required to write more or less complex texts in their everyday work practice (Ortoleva/Bétrancourt/Billet 2016: 2). Thus, writing is an essential and recurrent activity in workplace settings, which is carried out not only by professional writers or "career writers", as Couture (1992: 26) has termed them, but also by professionals whose occupation is not or not exclusively concerned with communication, but who use writing as a working tool (called "integrated writers" by Jakobs/Spinozzi 2014: 365 or "professionals-who-write" by Read/Michaud 2015: 430). Career writers are for example "information designers, journalists, editors, technical communicators, science writers, business writers, grant writers, PR officers, communication designers, magazine writers, screenwriters and nonfiction authors" (Schriver 2012: 278). In contrast, examples of professionals who use writing as a mere working tool are "teachers, […], professors, lawyers, researchers, scientists, politicians, architects, museum curators, engineers, doctors, nurses, computer scientists and managers" (Schriver 2012: 278). This diversity in writer profiles is reflected in the articles of this thematic section, which will discuss writing by both career writers (e.g., journalists in the article by Hartman Haugaard and Dam Jensen in this thematic section) and professionals who write (e.g., engineers and health professionals in the article by Breuer and Allsobrook in this thematic section).

Diversity does not only apply to writer profiles, but also to the *terms* that can be found to refer to the phenomenon of writing in a professional context: "professional writing", "writing in the workplace", "writing in work contexts", "writing in practice", "writing in non-academic settings", "writing in organizational settings", "writing in professional domains", to name just a few. The terms "professional writing" and "writing in the workplace" seem to be the most prolific and are often used interchangeably as umbrella terms, regardless of the professional domain or topic it concerns. However, it is important to observe that some scholars consider the meaning of these terms to be more or less inclusive of the two writer groups mentioned in the previous paragraph. Terminological confusion is further exacerbated when "professional writing", and to a lesser extent "writing in the workplace", are used not as umbrella terms, but rather to denominate a specific kind of workplace writing. For example, Couture (1992) refers to "professional/technical writing" as opposed to "administrative writing" and "engineering writing". In contrast, other scholars, such as Schubert (2012: 112), do not use "professional and "technical writing" as synonyms, but forego "professional writing" and specifically talk about "technical writing" (or rather "technical communication"), which they confine to the realm of engineering and technology in contrast with neighboring fields such as "legal communication", "medical communication" and "business communication". Bathia/Bremner (2014) mention that in literature on Business and Technical Communication the terms "professional writing", and in a broader sense, "professional communication" are used for "management communication, corporate communication, organizational and institutional communication" (p. xvi), and historically even for mass and (new) media com-

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munication. In addition, professional writing is sometimes used as an antonym of writing carried out in academic settings, i.e., in the classroom (Bremner 2018), whereas others such as Sullivan/ Porter (1992) use the term "professional writing" for the teaching of a specific type of writing in academic curricula, to delimit it from "technical writing", "business writing" and "journalism". Another source of terminological confusion is highlighted by Sullivan/Porter (1992), who state that the term "professional writing" is not only used as an umbrella term and as a term for a specific type of workplace writing, but also for a particular research field. This field is considered by some as part of the larger field of rhetoric and composition (e.g., Driscoll 2009: 196) or writing research (e.g., Jakobs/Perrin 2014), while others place it within the discipline of professional communication (e.g., Schriver 2012). It is important to note that the terms "professional writing" and "professional communication" are sometimes used interchangeably as well (cf. Schriver 2012), given the current reality that professional writing activities may extend beyond written text production and integrate visual design activities as well. Since we want to adopt a broad view on the wide range of writing (and by extension visual design) activities carried out by career writers and professionals-who-write in various domains, we will adopt the most prolific terms "professional writing" and "writing in the workplace" in this thematic section.

Diversity is also characteristic of the topics that have been addressed in the *research* on professional writing. Jakobs/Spinozzi (2014: 363) provide a historical overview of the main foci in workplace-writing research in North America and Europe: whereas the study of social aspects of professional writing have now gained momentum in workplace writing studies, research in previous decades was initially more oriented towards the textual characteristics of professional writing products and, subsequently, towards the cognitive processes of individual professional writers. Jakobs/Spinozzi (2014) also highlight that workplace writing research conducted on both continents has been and still is characterized by the use of a myriad of research methods: textual or document analysis, interviews, surveys, ethnographic and qualitative field methods such as contextual inquiry, participatory design, progression analysis, and grounded theory. Furthermore, we must not forget the methods that are used to explore what goes on in the "black box" of the professional writer. Methods such as computer keystroke logging, concurrent and retrospective think-aloud protocols, retrospective interviews and eyetracking are used (increasingly in triangulation) to shed light on the cognitive processes of professional writers. Van Waes/Leijten/Lindgren/Wengelin (2015), for example, provide an overview of keystroke logging research that has been conducted on contemporary professional writing in organisational settings, journalism and translation studies.

1.   Cognitive, purpose-driven, collaborative and social components of professional writing

Diversity can also be found in the artifacts that professional writers produce. They produce documents belonging to a multitude of genres, ranging from grant proposals, user manuals, incident reports, job safety instructions, informed consent forms to inquiry letters, brochures, press releases, memos, corporate blogs, webpages etc. These documents are characterized by enormously diverse contents and various formats (paper, digital) (Cellier/Terrier/Alamargot 2007: xi). The intended primary reader for such documents can be internal, pertaining to the workplace organization itself (e.g., management, supervisors, peers, subordinates), and/or external (e.g., customers, product users, general public). These readers can be experts in the subject matter at hand or novices. Referring to professional writing carried out by "career writers", Schriver highlights that "one of the hallmarks of writing professionally is the ability to shape the same content for different audiences" (2012: 282). However, professionals-who-write also have to be able to write interdiscursively (i.e. for readers that belong to a different discourse community), as Breuer and Allsobrook call it in their contribution to this thematic section.

Another characteristic of professional writing is its purpose-driven nature. The rhetorical goals of professional writing can be as varied as its genres, content types, formats and audiences, na-

mely to inform, to explain, to instruct and to persuade, etc. Documents also vary between single-purpose and multi-purpose ones (Cellier/Terrier/Alamargot 2007: xv). Schriver mentions sharing and collaborating as additional purposes of professional writing, as she situates professional communication in a broader social practice and emphasizes that professional writers create "cognitive structures and relational networks among people through shared content" (2012: 277).

It is also important to note that in a professional context, writing is seldom an activity of a single person, but entails collaboration between various group members and different stakeholders. Collaborative writing can be described from a group process and from a text production perspective, as suggested by Lowry/Curtis/Lowry (2004), who point out that successful collaborative writing outcomes at the group process level are defined by group awareness, participation and coordination. What is also important is an awareness of the various writing strategies that are effective for collaborative text production (e.g., group-single author writing, sequential single writing, parallel writing and mixed mode writing) and the advantages and pitfalls of each strategy. Lowry/Curtis/Lowry's text-production perspective on collaborative writing also relates to the fact that (parts of) the texts produced by professional writers may be used in other texts and by other communicators (belonging to the same team or not, including other types of text-producers such as translators) (Schriver, 2012). This reality is also reflected in the document life cycle described by Schubert (2005). This cycle consists of three major phases — production, translation and organization (i.e., document management), the first phase being the one in which professional writers are primarily active.

The purpose-driven and social aspects of professional writing mentioned above are reflected in the existing models of professional communication, such as Schriver (2012), Kellogg (2008), Hayes (2012) and Leijten/Van Waes/Schriver/Hayes (2014). Schriver (2012: 292), for example, highlights three interactive processes that professional communicators, and by extension professional writers, engage in:

- Constructing content (generating ideas for visual and verbal artifacts)

- Connecting content to stakeholders (shaping artifacts rhetorically to build cognitive structures and relational networks)

- Contextualizing design activity (making design activity visible and valued within the context of ongoing organizational activity)

In contrast, the model proposed by Leijten/Van Waes/Schriver/Hayes (2014, pictured in Figure 1) is focused on the cognitive activities of a professional writer. This model is an elaboration of Hayes' (2012) model and is based on empirical findings of an elaborate case study of a skilled professional communicator and insights previously reported by Kellogg (2008) and Schriver (2012). The model maps the professional writer's overall cognitive process, distinguishing between a process, resource and control level. What is different from previous models is that at the control level, *design schemas* is added to include visual communication as part of professional communication (see also Schriver 2012), and at the process level the concept of "text-produced-so-far" was broadened into "text-and-graphics-created-so-far". To account for the meta-cognitive activity of motivating oneself to work on a complex and time- consuming task, *motivation management* was added to the resource level. Most importantly, the *search process* was introduced: when the long-term memory of a writer fails, or is not the preferred source of information, writing processes may be interrupted by the need to search external sources, hence the searcher at the process level. Although this was previously absent in models of professional writing, Leijten/Van Waes/Schriver/Hayes stress that "the complex interactions among working memory, long term memory, and the search process need more explicit treatment in writing models" (2014: 326).
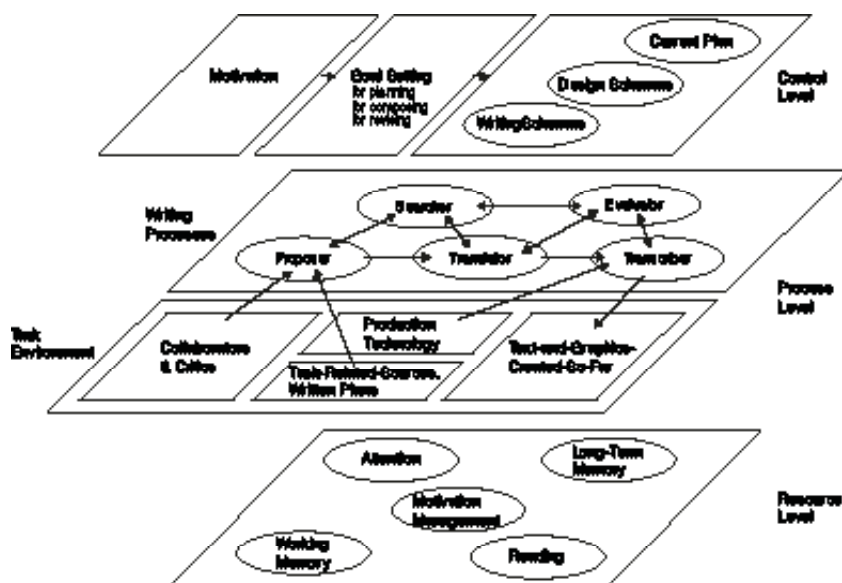
Figure 1. Model of professional writing by Leijten/Van Waes/Schriver/Hayes (2014)

2.   The importance of writing skills in the workplace

Since writing is a frequent activity in workplace settings, writing skills are essential and in high demand by employers, as confirmed by the Burning Glass report 'The human factor' (2015) on professionals' baseline skills. The analysis, based on 25 million unique job postings collected over a one-year period from September 2014 to August 2015, shows that, in the list of most important baseline skills, writing is ranked third in a wide variety of career areas (e.g., engineering, healthcare, information technology). The importance of writing skills cannot solely be attributed to the prolific usage of such skills in workplace settings, but also to the technical, legal, economic and social impact that writing in the workplace and its artifacts may have (Cellier/Terrier/Alamargot 2007: xi). If the documents that are written are neither relevant for the intended reader nor effective in achieving the established communicative goal(s), this may have serious consequences. On the website of Hurley Write, Inc., (2016), a company specialized in professional and technical writing courses, some of the dangers are listed: poor writing may result in injury or death, may cost sales and business, may hurt a company's reputation and credibility, may damage employee morale and undermine respect in the workplace, but also means lost ideas and a waste of time, since the message may be lost in the fog and needs to be re-communicated. Several governments have taken note of the costs of poor professional writing and have passed so-called plain language acts. By ensuring communication that the audience can understand the first time they read or hear it, it is hoped that citizens comprehend official documents (more quickly), make fewer errors filling out forms, comply more accurately and quickly with requirements, and require less additional explanations, according to the Plain Language website of the United States government (https://www.plainlanguage.gov/about/benefits/).

   Writing skills are not only one of the baseline skills most demanded in various occupations, but also the most under-supplied skill in the candidate pool, as shown by the Burning Glass report 'The human factor' (2015). This is not surprising, considering the difficulty of acquiring a professional level of writing skills. It takes approximately 20 years to become an experienced writer or knowledge crafter, i.e., "a writer that shapes what to say and how to say it with the potential reader fully in mind" (Kellogg 2008: 7). Kellogg (2008) showed that the practicing of sub-skills is important, given the high cognitive demands inherent in writing. Communicators should be able to judge issues like: form, content, style, but also arrangement, graphics, typography, etc. Schriver

(2012) points to the importance of purpose-driven professional communication being "visually engaging and rhetorically effective". Writing training in all these subskills seems, therefore, fundamental. As the Burning Glass report states "[...] the skills most commonly requested by employers - organization, communication, writing and computer skills - can all be learned by workers and built into education and training systems" (2015: 15). Strangely enough, however, professional writing skills are not always taught or addressed effectively at undergraduate or graduate courses, as for example Breuer et al. (2015) found when surveying the curricula for engineering and health sciences at universities or professional schools in Germany and the U.K. Hence, professional writing skills are not always present on entry of an occupation. Therefore, and in light of the continuous evolution of workplace settings and document formats and requirements, ongoing professional development is fundamental. For an overview of recent research into what they call 'writing in practise', we would like to refer to the edited volume *Writing for Professional Development* by Ortoleva/Bétrancourt/Billet (2016), who have collected studies on how practitioners learn to write for professional requirements.

3.   Brief overview of the articles in the thematic section

This thematic section contains three articles, which reflect the diversity in writer profiles, professional fields, research foci and research methods that we briefly discussed above:

Esther Breuer and Penelope Allsobrook's article, **Teaching and Practising Interdiscursivity in the Professional Areas of Engineering and Health – A Qualitative Study,** concerns the gap between the writing skills needed in the workplace and the training in professional writing offered in undergraduate and graduate programmes. From the interviews that Breuer and Allsobrook conducted among engineers and health professionals (i.e., professionals-who-write), it becomes clear that the number of text genres that the members of these professions were taught, if taught at all, at university or in vocational training were not only limited, but also did not conform with the genres most frequently used in their future professional careers. Interestingly enough, both the interviewed engineers and health professionals do not consider this discrepancy particularly critical. This lack of concern can be explained by multiple factors. Firstly, many of the interviewed professionals are simply not aware of the importance of professional writing skills. Moreover, they are not motivated to improve these skills, since they simply are not paid for improved communication or because other, intermediate, communicators are employed to optimize the texts they produce. From Breuer and Allsobrook's interviews, it turned out that those professionals who showed awareness of what effective professional writing could and should entail are mostly self-employed and have had to find ways to improve their interdiscursive writing skills themselves.

Rikke Hartman Haugaard and Helle Dam Jensen's article, **Analysing revisions in online writing**, demonstrates that studying real-life writing processes of professional writers is useful and necessary to continue developing and finetuning theoretical frameworks that describe aspects of professional writing. They provide more insight into the revision component of professional writing (which is included for example at the process level in the model by Leijten/Van Waes/Schriver/Hayes 2014). Hartmann Haugaard/Dam Jensen suggest a reassessment of the taxonomy developed by Lindgren/Sullivan (2006) of online revision, i.e. revision carried out throughout the text-production process. Based on the keystroke logging data of the text-production processes of Spanish journalists (cf. 'career writers'), Hartmann Haugaard/Dam Jensen observed that Lindgren/Sullivan's taxonomy posed a number of challenges in connection with the classification of the journalists' revisions. A particularly problematic aspect of Lindgren/Sullivan's taxonomy/framework is their definition of external contextual revisions, i.e., revisions visible in the text that are conducted within a previously written and completed sentence and are both preceded and followed by text. In other words, Lindgen/Sullivan (2006) take the location of the revision in the

text as a point of departure for classifying external contextual revisions. However, on the basis of a number of enlightening examples, Hartmann Haugaard/Dam Jensen recommend a type of analysis that determines whether or not these revisions are made in a semantically meaningful text. Moreover, they propose replacing the dichotomy between contextual and pre-contextual revisions with a continuum of semantically meaningful context, which leaves room to interpret the revisions on the degree of completeness of the context in which they are made.

Franziska Heidrich and Klaus Schubert's article, **Writing Research and Specialized Communication Studies**, showcases that professional writing is a research topic of interest to and addressed by many academic (sub)disciplines, such as writing research, discourse studies, professional communication, applied linguistics, business communication, specialized communication studies, to name just a few. Unfortunately, awareness of research insights across these fields is often absent. The article by Heidrich/Schubert is one step in the direction of creating more awareness of how scholars from different disciplines can collaborate and shed light on the same research topic. They discuss how two of the disciplines mentioned above, writing research and specialized communication studies, are related in terms of their evolution, paradigms, theoretical models and research interests. Furthermore, they discuss the common ground and differences between the two fields and how they may benefit from collaboration.

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