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## The Neglected Life Skill

Amy Harder

Texas A&M University, [aharder@tamu.edu](mailto:aharder@tamu.edu)



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## The Neglected Life Skill

### Abstract

Well developed writing skills are in high demand in the professional workplace, yet American students continue to struggle with this important life skill. While 4-H has an exceptional history of teaching oral communication skills, writing has become the neglected life skill. If 4-H is to help its members succeed in all areas of communication, writing must move beyond the realm of the record book and be given a more central role in program planning.

### Amy Harder

Graduate Assistant  
Texas A&M University  
College Station, Texas  
[aharder@tamu.edu](mailto:aharder@tamu.edu)

## Introduction

*I pledge my Head to clearer thinking, my Heart to greater loyalty, my Hands to larger service, and my Health to better living, for my club, my community, my country and my world.*

This is the pledge of the National 4-H program, the single largest out-of-school youth organization in the United States. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (n.d., 4-H Mission), the mission of 4-H is to "[empower] youth to reach their full potential, working and learning in partnership with caring adults." This is accomplished by teaching life skills in experiential, hands-on activities to 4-H members that address each of the four primary areas of living: Head, Heart, Hands, and Health.

While 4-H has existed for over one hundred years and has always sought to improve the lives and skills of youth, it was not until the late 20th century that structured models of life skills began to emerge. These models were developed in response to a need for focus and consistency among the many 4-H programs within each state and across the country. Although there is still some disagreement about which life skills should be included, one model has emerged with a great degree of acceptance within the field.

This popular design was developed at Iowa State University and is known as the "Targeting Life Skills Model" (Hendricks, 1996). The TLS model places 35 life skills into four major categories—Head, Heart, Hands, and Health—and then subdivides the skills into eight subcategories: giving, working, living, being, thinking, managing, relating, and caring.

## Problem Statement

Of the many TLS model life skills that 4-H seeks to teach youth, 4-H seems to do a particularly good job in the area of communication (Boyd, Herring, & Briers, 1992; Fitzpatrick, Hatch Gagne, Jones, Lobley & Phelps, 2005). This life skill routinely receives high scores on assessments of 4-H members. However, some researchers have recognized the difficulty in getting accurate responses to a life skill as broadly defined as communication, instead differentiating written from oral skills in their evaluation efforts.

The result of this differentiation has revealed what seems to be a bias in 4-H—one that emphasizes oral communication and neglects written. This is evident in some notable studies that elected only to measure the oral segment of communication skills (e.g., Boleman, Cummings, & Briers, 2004; Rusk, Martin, Talbert, & Balschweid, 2002). Fox, Schroeder, and Lodl's study of the life skills taught by 4-H gives further verification of this trend, with alumni reporting such statements as "I learned

skills for effective communication: presentations and public speaking," and "The most important things I learned were how to speak in front of a group and how to put a presentation together" (2003, Communication Skills).

Admittedly, there is a heavier emphasis on oral communication in 4-H, as many programs require their members to give demonstrations and speeches in order to complete their 4-H project. Also, traditionally popular 4-H activities such as livestock and horse judging are designed to teach youth how to give oral reasons in front of a judge. Studies on these activities, such as those previously mentioned (Boleman, et al. 2004; Rusk, et al. 2002), have acknowledged the inherent focus of judging on teaching oral communication skills.

Speaking skills are valuable, but in what 4-H activities does a 4-H member have the opportunity to practice his/her writing skills? A typical member may actively participate in an entire year of 4-H and write only once, to complete the project record book. Nearly every 4-H project is accompanied by a record book that members are expected to fill out, although designs of the record book vary. The record book, in some programs, is the only written work required by 4-H. This situation leads to two important questions. How much emphasis should be placed upon written communication skills in 4-H? And, if it is important to emphasize written communication, how can agents convey this message to their members?

## The Importance of Writing

As a youth development program, 4-H seeks to graduate youth who are prepared to become productive citizens for their community. Increasingly, writing skills are becoming a greater part of taking on a role as a productive citizen. In fact, a report from the College Board's National Commission on Writing for America's Families, Schools and Colleges (2005) found writing skills to be a significant factor in the hiring and promotion processes for state level professional employees. In their survey of 49 state level human resource departments, 75% agreed that writing skills were taken into consideration for hiring and promotion of employees. While good writing skills may help land a position, the commission found that the lack thereof almost certainly bars a candidate from employment, according to 80% of the human resource departments surveyed.

The situation is much the same in private industry, as well. In their 2004 report, the National Commission on Writing presented the results from 64 major American companies associated with the Business Roundtable. As with the public sector, employers in private industry noted the importance of good writing skills for job applicants and current employees looking to move up in the company. According to Berman's study, the service industry is expected to provide the most new jobs in the next decade, and 80% or more of salaried employees in these professions have writing responsibilities (as cited in College Entrance Examination Board, 2004). This is a particularly important statistic for today's high school and college students who will be seeking salaried jobs in this time frame.

Yet, despite the obvious importance of writing skills in the American workplace, students are shockingly unprepared to meet the necessary challenges ahead. In 2002, the U.S. Department of Education found in their National Assessment of Educational Progress that while 74% of high school seniors were capable of writing at or above a basic level, only 24% performed at the proficiency level, and a scant 2% were considered advanced (U.S. Department of Education, 2003). These figures do not bode well for students seeking future employment or for the state of the educational system today.

## Implications

It is clear that writing will be a critical part of many 4-H members' professional lives and that 4-H cannot afford to neglect this segment of communication. The importance of writing is paramount in helping youth to "connect the dots in their knowledge" (College Board, 2003, p. 3) and cannot be ignored by a youth development organization such as 4-H. In compliance with the official mission of empowering youth to reach their full potential, 4-H must find a way to incorporate more opportunities to help youth succeed at writing, through such activities as pen pal exchanges, creative writing contests, or writing clinics.

Can 4-H rise to the occasion to best prepare its youth to meet the demands of the "real world"? Perhaps more important, can 4-H afford not to?

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## Discussion