Notes from an employer:

On bad resumes and cover letters

My husband Greg, a personal trainer and therapist, often receives unsolicited resumes in the mail from recent Cal Poly graduates looking for work as interns, therapy assistants, athletic trainers, or even office help. Some of these resumes can be quite entertaining, sometimes even horrifying, in their misunderstanding of document design, their focus on what the potential employee wants from a job rather than what he or she can provide in a job, and especially in their all-too-common disregard for the proprieties of the English language. And don’t even get me started on their cover letters!

Where do these resumes end up? In the trash, of course, since lack of careful attention to detail in a one-page resume probably indicates a similar lack of attention to detail in that person’s work. And in a professional office, the details are critical. (think of the steel beams that hold the building you’re in right now).

Greg’s and my response to careless resume and cover letter correspondence illustrates a principle noted by Larry Beason in his 2007 article “Ethos and Error in the Professional Resume”. While some of us in academia are willing to tolerate poor writing from our students until it interferes with meaning, Beason adds another insight to the mix. In a longitudinal study that surveyed business people hiring college graduates, he asked participants to respond to badly written letters and resumes and to specify what types of errors they found and how as readers, they reacted to those errors. Interestingly, the participants’ greatest concern with written mistakes focused on the character and credibility (that is, the ethos) of the writer.

Beason found that in business writing, readers’ negative responses to poor resumes and letters focused on several key communication areas: the writer’s carelessness and hastiness, the writer’s deficient thinking skills, the writer’s likelihood of being a similarly poor speaker, and the writer’s probable liability as a negative representative of the reader’s business.

Bad writing damaged the perceived credibility of the writer, even if the mistake was NOT one that interfered with meaning (such as substituting “affect” for “effect”). Beason makes explicit what Greg and other leaders in the working world know intuitively: A business cannot afford a new employee whose lack of writing skills may drive off potential clients or compromise the quality of the product or service. Here at Cal Poly, we’re preparing students for the work world of business, industry, and the professions. Our graduates’ writing reflects their credibility, and their training in this area reflects ours. If you need a reason to expect and demand excellent quality communication from your students, this “ethos gap” is it!