

In an online world where e-learning is still testing its sea legs, writing professionals and e-based training companies remain optimistic about the prospect of teaching business writing over the Internet. That is, as long as their intended audience — corporate employees — is willing to go along for the ride.

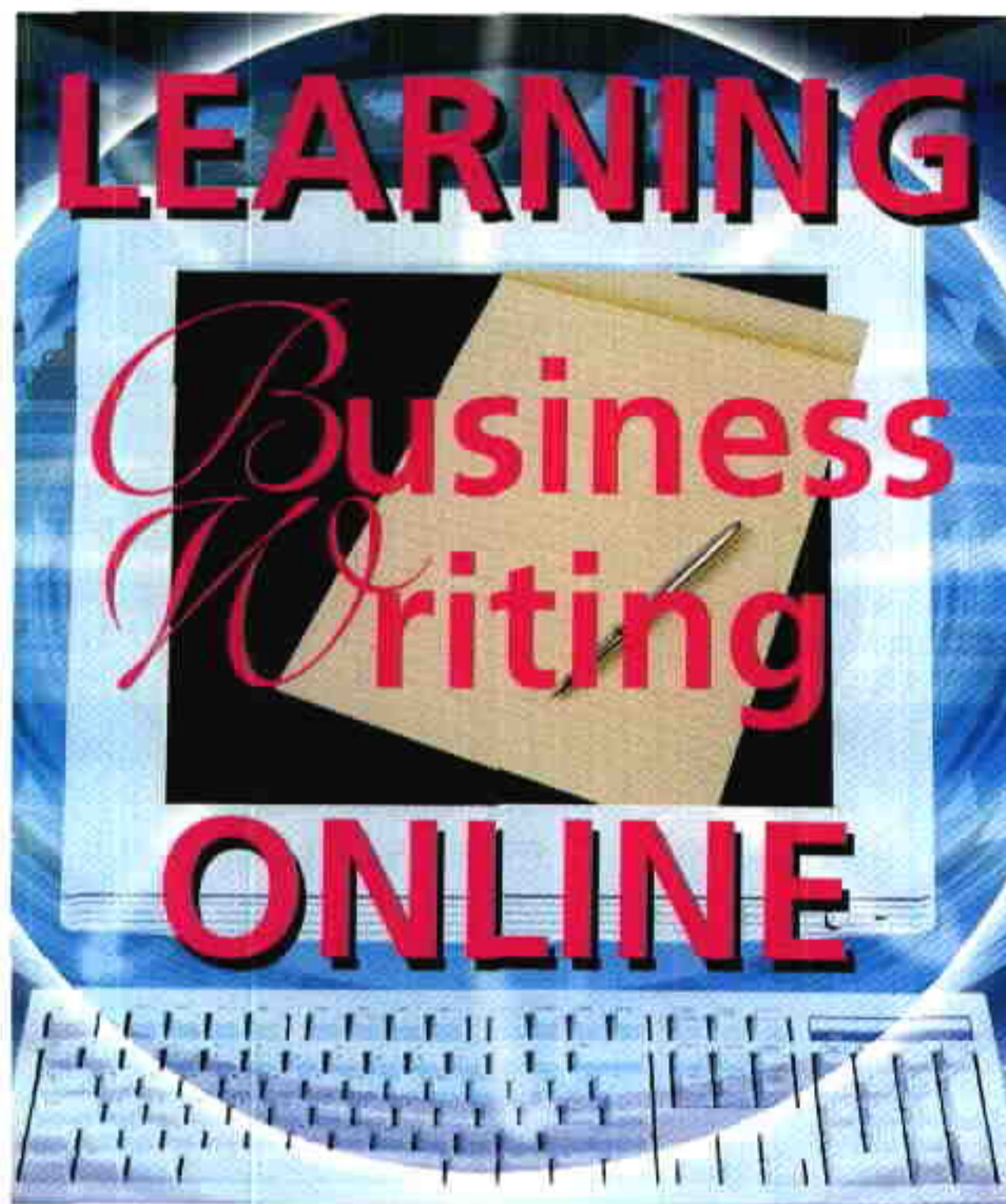
Business writing will continue to be valued by recruiters and hiring professionals, who believe a person's ability to write well can help him or her move up the corporate ladder. Steven C. Kanten, president of Park City, Utah-based KCI (Kanten Communications International), says writing can be taught asynchronously, or with the time delays that come with the use of email and voicemail. On the other hand, teaching oral communication skills requires both asynchronous and synchronous, or real-time, involvement such as discussion. Kanten also believes that content for a writing course can be delivered successfully through e-learning without fancy graphics and multi-media.

He thinks the key to motivation in teaching writing is feedback. People striving to improve their writing want constructive criticism, support and encouragement. As long as feedback is available, it does not matter so much whether it is offered online or in person.

Success in teaching business writing online ultimately depends on two major factors: content and process, Kanten maintains. With that premise in mind, KCI recently formed a strategic alliance with Primelearning.com, a new company in Stamford, Conn. KCI, which has offered technical- and business-writing training for the past 20 years — most recently online — will provide

the content for varied levels of business-writing courses.

PrimeLearning.com brings to the table its technology-driven process and Web-based delivery system. Each company will do what it does best, and the hope is that the combination of strong course content, a proven infrastructure and a Web-based solution will meld into a vehi-



cle that works well for the learner.

According to an August 2000 brief on e-learning, published by The Forum Corp., "What really matters is how learners want to learn, not how an organization wants to teach them." PrimeLearning.com hopes to recognize and accommodate students' varied personal-learning needs with different approaches.

For instance, some learners have the self-discipline and interest to proceed independently through self-paced classes. For this type of participant, PrimeLearning.com plans to complement the learning experience by offering discussion boards and

recommended readings and activities. For those who need more personal interaction, PrimeLearning.com will provide virtual classrooms and scheduled online chat sessions. In any case, it's critical that the trainer keep the learner motivated.

At KCI, online course participants have the options of calling a "writer hotline," and of receiving feedback on their writing for up to a year after they've finished their class. PrimeLearning.com also offers a "mentorship program" for writers who want to continue getting feedback after the course is over.

Lguide.com, an independent e-learning research and consulting company, provides a ranking of the most effective e-learning business writing classes. Key factors in the ratings were the effectiveness of a course to give the student interactive experiences and hands-on writing practice. To make any course worthwhile, ongoing writing assignments should give the student work-related writing experience. Other pluses include the provision of useful references and resources for future use.

With all of this technology, will the almighty pen, the desk and the classroom teacher fall by the wayside? Not likely. Interestingly, in a 1998 Harvard Business School study of learner and buyer preferences, 87 percent of participants preferred instructor-led training; only 13 percent chose computer-based instruction.

It's likely that the preference for online instruction will grow, so the best scenario may be one that involves both conventional and e-learning methods. After all, who says business writing has to be taught in black and white?

By Susan Schott Karr

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