Ethics on the Page:

Repositioning Language, Power, and Professional Responsibility in Public Relations

by

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A dissertation accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in Communications & Media Studies

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Dissertation abstract

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Doctor of Philosophy in Communications & Media Studies

Title: Ethics on the Page: Repositioning Language, Power, and Professional Responsibility in Public Relations

The dissertation examines public relations practitioners as a speech community of language workers with a responsibility for language. It draws on lessons from sociolinguistics, Technical and Professional Communication, and Critical Language Awareness to examine the metalinguistic interviews with 22 professional communicators from a variety of sectors, roles, and levels of seniority. Designed with a focus on participant agency and comfort, the interviews followed a semi-structured interview format, adapted from Wright's (2022) Metalinguistic Method of Sociolinguistic Interview (MMSI) protocol. The interviews were designed to be a conversation between peers, with the researcher having 15 years of experience working as a professional communicator.

The conversations were rich discussions about language, writing, and professional responsibility, resulting in four themes: (1) The participants presented as a professional community with a shared understanding of the practices and expectations for language work; (2) The participants possessed metalinguistic awareness and a focus on audience understanding; (3) The participants felt a deep ethical responsibility but lacked formal frameworks to identify and resolve concerns; and (4) The participants shared opportunities for agency, change, and resistance. The dissertation concludes with a discussion of potential implications, including the expansion of organizational conscience, relationship management, and role theory.

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About the author

Sandra Boone (she/her) is a public relations/strategic communication professional and PhD candidate with 15 years of experience working in higher education, nonprofit, and political settings. She most recently worked at the University of Minnesota, where she managed communications for Global Programs and Strategy Alliance, International Student and Scholar Services, the Immigration Response Team, and Housing and Residential Life.

Sandra's research examines questions of equity and professional responsibility for public relations/strategic communications professionals, focusing on the power in/of language. Her research bridges functionalist and critical/socio-cultural public relations scholarship, drawing inspiration from the social justice turn in Technical and Professional Communications. She is a participant in the Raciolinguistic Emotion Perception Psycholinguistics and Sociolinguistics Lab at the University of Oregon.

Sandra previously earned a Strategic Communication MA at the University of Minnesota with a minor in Literacy and Rhetorical Studies. Her final Capstone research examined the communications practices of anti-trafficking organizations to discuss the need for ethical/equitable storytelling practices for all professional communicators.

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Curriculum vita

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Peer-reviewed Journal Articles

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Pre-print

- **Boone, S.** (2026) What's behind those 'happy diversity' smiles? A critical visual analysis of representations of diversity and its implications for diversity communications. *SSRN*. Available at papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=6775198

Professional Writing

- **Boone, S**. (2021, February 26). Ethical and equitable storytelling. University of Minnesota Marketing Communications. Available at umarcomm.umn.edu/blog/2021/02/26/ethical-and-equitable-storytelling
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- Panelist (November 2024): "A new code is needed for new conversations: A critical textual analysis of the PRSA code of ethics and practitioners' responsibility to the public good." National Communications Association (NCA) 2024 conference, Activism & Social Justice division, New Orleans, LA
- Poster presentation (May 2024): "Keeping 'commodity diversity' in stock: A critical social semiotic analysis of representations of diversity in stock photography." University of Oregon Graduate Research Forum, Eugene, OR
- Panelist and Co-organizer (April 2024): "Navigating DEI communications with the DEPTH model." Institute for Public Relations Bridge 2024, Washington, DC
- Paper presentation (May 2023): "Demonstrating framing choices as 'relevant and real:' A content analysis of the diversity rhetoric used by Fortune 500 companies." Communicating Diversity Student Conference 2023, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX

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Guest Lectures

- J210: Media and Society (F23, 1-hour lecture on inclusive language)
- J560: Visualizing Diversity (Sp23, Two 1-hour lectures addressing the equity and power concerns for communicators)

Professional Presentations

- Speaker (2022): "Addressing DEI is more than using the 'correct' words and pictures," University of Minnesota Communicators Forum, Minneapolis, MN
- Presenter (2021): "Becoming an equity-centered communicator," Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, Advancement, Communications, and Technology Conference (ACTcon), St. Paul, MN (co-presenter with Naaima Khan, Create Good)
- Moderator and panelist (2019): "Google translate this: Best practices for engaging international students," University of Minnesota Communicators Forum, Minneapolis, MN (co-presenter with Marina Ueharra and Michael Anderson)
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  - Delivered a lecture on the power of language
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  - Delivered a lecture on the power of language
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- 2023 Travel Funding from the University of Florida Center for Public Interest Communication
- 2022-2026 Columbia Scholarship from the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication
- 2022-2025 Travel Funding from the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication

SERVICE

University of Oregon

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- Graduate Council, Graduate Student Representative (2024-2025 school year)
- Instructional and Administrative Content Accessibility Advisory Collaborative (IACA2C), Member (2025-2026 school year)
- School of Journalism and Communications Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee, Graduate Student Representative (2025-2026 school year)
- Student Services & Enrollment Management Student Advisory Board, Graduate Student Member (2023-2024 school year)

Professional Activities

- University of Minnesota Communicators Forum, Co-chair and member of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee, January 2020-August 2022 (Co-chair 2021-2022)
- University of Minnesota Diversity Community of Practice, Communications Subcommittee Member, January 2021-August 2022
- Citizens Utility Board of Minnesota (CUB-MN), Board & Finance Committee member, January 2021-August 2022
- Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) and Minnesota Public Relations Society of America (Minnesota PRSA), Member, September 2020-August 2022
- Young Nonprofit Professionals Network of the Twin Cities (YNPN-TC), Board Secretary, At-Large Board Member, Managing Blog Editor, July 2014-August 2018

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

University of Minnesota's Global Programs & Strategy Alliance
Communications Specialist
Minneapolis, MN
July 2025-September 2025 (returned for PDF remediation project during summer break)
September 2014-December 2021

- Served as the primary communicator for the Immigration Response Team (May 2018-December 2022) and International Student and Scholar Services (September 2014-December 2022), including the creation of marketing and communications plans and the writing and design of materials
- Added to ISSS leadership meetings to provide counsel on communications strategy, internal communications, and stakeholder management

University of Minnesota's Housing and Residential Life
Communications Manager
Minneapolis, MN
June 2023-September 2023 (returned to provide temporary support during summer break)
January 2022-September 2022 (left for Ph.D.)

- Managed department-wide communications strategy for all stakeholders, including current residents, prospective residents, parents, employees, and the UMN community
- Streamlined the organization's process for responding to questions during high-demand times by creating FAQs, templates, and customized webpages that could be updated as needs arose
- Created the organization's first comprehensive crisis communications plan
- Supervised the organization's full-time Graphic Designer and piloted the use of Asana for project management

BlueGreen Alliance
Communications Associate
Minneapolis, MN
March 2011-March 2014

- Managed an organization-wide, multi-step rebranding process to identify a cohesive, audience-centric brand that could be used throughout the organization
- Coordinated the marketing, media outreach, and external communication efforts for the BlueGreen Alliance Foundation's GreenPOWER program
- Developed and executed a multi-channel paid and unpaid social media plan

Minnesota Senate DFL Research
Researcher and Communications Specialist
St. Paul, MN
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- Conducted issue-based research, coordinated media outreach for several senators, and assisted with responding to constituent concerns

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all the communicators I interviewed. Our conversations left me energized and recommitted to pushing ahead with doing this non-traditional dissertation. I hope you hear your voices in this dissertation, along with the tremendous respect I have for each of you.

Next, I thank the members of my dissertation committee, Drs. Dean Mundy (chair), Chris Chávez, Senyo Ofori-Parku, Rachel Weissler, and Shawna Shapiro. I was honored by your interest in my work as I made the not-always-smooth transition from "professional communicator" to "Ph.D. student/candidate," examining the field that had been my life.

Thank you to Karen Yin for creating *The Conscious Style Guide* website and book (Yin, 2024, 2026), Alex Kapitan for *Radical Copyeditor* (Kapitan, n.d.), and Kim Clark and Janet M. Stovall for *The Conscious Communicator: The Fine Art of Not Saying Stupid Sh*t* (Stovall & Clark, 2022). This dissertation would not exist without the ways your work challenged me to rethink my relationship with language and my work as a communicator.

I am also deeply appreciative of all those I found for support, community, and inspiration, including the Raciolinguistic Emotion Perception Psycholinguistics and Sociolinguistics Lab (convened by Dr. Rachel Weissler); the Critical Language Awareness Collective (organized by Dr. Shawna Shapiro); the Liberatory Practice Circle (curated by Naaima Khan); the UO Nontraditional and Graduate Student Support Group (facilitated by Melissa Gomsrud), Overflow Super Store (owned by Kismet Tyler), Make Well (assembled by Kathryn Snell-Ryan), Geek Girls of Eugene (created by Chelsea McDougall); and 16 Tons Café. Thank you to the scholars and practitioners I met along the way, including my SOJC cohort, plus Amira Barger, Allison Durazzi, Erika Darics, Anetra Henry, Emilee Jackson, Nii Mahliaire, Ellen Paulley, and Keelia Silvis.

Thank you to my mom (Cecelia Boone) for being my biggest and truest supporter. Thank you to my Minnesota frollegues (Sarah Krueger, Jennie Magner, Calli Thompson, and Marina Uehara) for always being in my corner while also pushing my thinking. I also give an extra big thank you to the amazing family in Oregon who welcomed me into their family and home for this strange four-year ride (Ana, Cambrin, Nessa, and John Miller, plus pets, Zelda, Oso, and Geddy). I don't know if I would have made it through without your support.

And finally, I pause to remember my friend, Blake Linton, who died during my first year. I will always appreciate the night and day you spent packing my apartment when it was time to leave for Oregon, along with the texts and movie nights for my stressful days. I know you are somewhere, losing yourself to dance, and boasting to all who will listen: "I said she didn't need to worry. She beats all her games on the hardest setting—just like me." I miss you, soulfriend.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) use disclosure statement

In preparing this dissertation, the following Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used: M365 Copilot and ChatGPT. These tools were used primarily to aid with examining ideas and writing assistance for editing, phrasing, and clarity. The author acknowledges full responsibility for the intellectual content of this work. All AI-generated content was reviewed and validated for relevance, appropriateness, and accuracy before being incorporated into the final document.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all my fellow communicators—the professionals who keep messages understandable despite endless rounds of edits; know execution will be stronger when comms planning comes first; and understand intuitively that the one "quick request" will take longer than anyone appreciates.

***

Communicators are lonely.

Not personally. Professionally.

Most comms teams are a team of one. You're surrounded by people who don't fully understand what you do, why it takes as long as it does, or why the word choice actually matters.

A lot of you report to someone who has never written a crisis brief in their life.

So you do the work. You make it look easy. And then you wonder in private if you're doing it right.

That's the structural reality of this profession.

It's also why, whenever two communicators find each other, they don't stop talking. (Méndez Aróstica, 2026, emphasis added)

"Having urged people off the sidelines, it's time we heed our own advice"

***PR Week*, 2021, Emily K. Graham and Bia Assevero**

We hold the conviction that communicators have the power to catalyze and drive organizational change. So often, we are an organization's connective tissue; the people to whom everyone else talks, even when they rarely talk to one another.

We are brand builders and storytellers. We are also protectors who work to safeguard the reputation and minimize risk. That's still our job. But it has evolved. Now, we must be the barometer of authenticity. Instead of merely proclaiming, 'What we do we say,' we must ask, 'What have we done?'

We know the 'authenticity litmus test.' But how disciplined and vocal have you been in pushing back when you know the substance is lacking, particularly with equity, inclusion, and diversity?...

The communicators who will succeed now and in the future are those who are the keepers of credibility and responsible stewards of reputation. They will challenge old ways of working and confront prioritizing perception over the reality of change.

"You ARE a communicator"

LinkedIn, Codi J., 2025

You're not JUST a social media manager, you ARE a communicator.

A communicator in every essence of the word.

From crafting messages to starting conversations to building online communities. We communicate. And in this world, communication is currency.

CHAPTER 1. Introduction

... Communicators ... Practitioners ... Storytellers ... Publicists ... Spokespeople ...

... Social Media Organizers ...Public Information Officers (PIOs) ... Press Agents ...

... Chief Communications Officers (CCOs) ... "The People Who Make Us Look/Sound Good" ...

... Words People ... Wordsmiths ... Fixers ... Crisis Managers ... Information Subsidies ...

... Astroturfers ... Hacks ... Flacks ... Language Police ... Apologists ... Mouthpieces ...

... Spin Doctors ... Propagandists ... Manipulators ... Professional Liars ...[1]

There are many labels thrown at (and claimed by) the professionals who make their living doing public relations and other forms of professional communication. Some are technical terms describing various parts or iterations of the job. Others are flashier moral and ethical characterizations using language ranging from the mundane to the sinister. There seems to be a common assumption that underlies these terms: That public relations practitioners are masters of words—professionals instinctively skilled in the subtleties of language, capable of using it to bend meaning (and even reality) to their will.

And yet, an examination of the public relations scholarship presents a limited engagement with the specifics of writing and language work (Anwer, 2020; Hardin & Pompper, 2004). Discussions in peer-reviewed journals focus on topics like the selection of message frames (Hallahan, 1999), the utilization of discourses (Mayr, 2010), the creation of meaning through rhetoric (Heath & Frandsen, 2008), and the justification and (mis)use of persuasion (Baker, 1999). The writing instruction similarly focuses on the mastery of genres and technical skills, such as understanding "strategic approaches to PR writing" (Meganck & Smith, 2019, p.

[1] I created this list from a combination of first-hand experience and writing by others (Curtin, 1999; Flocken, 2019; Hansen-Horn & LaGree, 2020; Turney, 2010).

43); using "professional language" (Tench, 2003, p. 139); and "honing AP style, grammar, and concise writing techniques" (Baum, 2019, p. 2).

Notably, these normative and prescriptivist expectations position "'communication' … as programmatic, instrumental, and ethically neutral" (Demetrious, 2022, p. 1). They say *what* practitioners should do with language, but they do not ask *how*, *why*, or *if* those decisions should be made (Anwer, 2020; Doh et al., 2024). It also does not encourage critical examination of the ways language can be purposely weaponized or unintentionally used to mislead, anger, silence, or otherize issues, people, and entire communities (Demetrious, 2022; Lippi-Green, 2012).

Similarly, ethical conversations in public relations often call on practitioners to serve as their organizations' organizational conscience (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012). The conversations are generally discussed as matters of organizational decision-making and stakeholder management (Rawlins, 2008), rather than as acts enacted or obscured through language choices such as wording, framing, and discourse.

This means students and practitioners are not trained to consider the ways linguistic decisions present "ethical choices… in every act of professional writing" (Tillery, 2001, p. 98)—an alarming oversight for an industry responsible for crafting and communicating messages that shape the ways people view organizations, issues, and the world around them. This dissertation examines public relations practitioners to understand how they negotiate these ethical choices when writing, arguing that language decisions can be a site of agency and power when recognized. These are choices available to all communicators, regardless of seniority or membership in their organization's dominant coalition. This opens the possibility ***for all*** communicators to critically negotiate, resist, or reject problematic practices, such as prescriptive writing mandates or performative communications (Stovall & Clark, 2022).

1.1. Dissertation overview

This dissertation addresses a gap in the practice, research, and teaching of public relations by naming and complicating the field's current understanding of language and its connection to questions of ethics and professional responsibility. It is interdisciplinary, incorporating lessons from sociolinguistics, Technical and Professional Communications (TPC), and Critical Language Awareness (CLA). It shares findings from 22 metalinguistic interviews conducted with professional communicators across varying levels and specialties,[2] discussing their beliefs about language and related ethical concerns. It is based on a premise examined in TPC scholarship but seemingly under-researched in public relations: Writing is not a neutral skill but an act of authorship that has ethical significance for an organization's relationships, authority, and responsibility (see Slack et al., 1993).

As I will discuss throughout this dissertation, I felt committed to leading by example when conducting the research. This led to several decisions meant to embody the spirit of CLA's goals, as identified in Shapiro's (2021) CLA pedagogy: self-reflection, social justice, and rhetorical agency. Accordingly, I incorporated moments of reflection into this dissertation where I share the ways my experience and knowledge as a practitioner and scholar shaped my methodological choices and interpretation. This reflection begins after this overview, with a statement of my positionality describing who I am as a researcher, communicator, and person. These reflections are in no way perfunctory; instead, I view them to be essential disclosures for the integrity of this insider research (Greene, 2014).

1.1.1. Chapters-by-chapter walkthrough

Next, I begin Chapter 2 by introducing key terminology for this dissertation, both from

[2] I discuss my decision to use the term "communicators" in CHAPTER 2.

scholarship and the choices I made when drafting. This chapter is intended to help orient readers, particularly those who are unfamiliar with sociolinguistics and/or public relations.

In Chapter 3, I present a literature review arranged around three fundamental segments of a practitioner's role as it relates to language: Professional, Writer, and Ethical Actor. This includes a combination of research from public relations and other fields, like sociolinguistics and English for Specific Purposes. I discuss the need I found to look to these other fields to better understand the public relations practitioner as someone who creates and is created by language and ethics. I also share additional insights that the field of sociolinguistics adds to understanding professional communicators, including journalists.

In Chapter 4, I introduce the interdisciplinary theoretical framework that serves as the backbone for this study. It explores professional communicators as a speech community of language workers with responsibility for language. It then proposes deepening the field's understanding of professional responsibility, drawing lessons from Technical and Professional Communications (TPC) and Critical Language Awareness (CLA) to attend to the micro-level decisions communicators make when creating messages.

In Chapter 5, I list the research questions guiding this study. They examine "communicators" as a speech community and identity. They then ask how practitioners understand ethics and professional responsibility.

Next, in Chapter 6, I will introduce the semi-structured interview format I developed for my conversations with professional communicators. It followed an adapted form of Wright's (2022) Metalinguistic Method of Sociolinguistic Interview (MMSI) protocol, augmented based on Koller's (2018) interviews with language workers. I also share intentional decisions I made to increase participants' feelings of ownership and agency during the interviews, viewing them as

the experts of their language ideologies and practices.

In Chapter 7, I present the findings from these conversations. They discuss the realities of professional communications, including the ethical questions practitioners face when engaging in language work. The findings are robust: (1) The participants presented as a professional community with a shared understanding of the practices and expectations for language work; (2) The participants possessed metalinguistic awareness and a focus on audience understanding; (3) The participants felt a deep ethical responsibility but lacked formal frameworks to identify and resolve concerns; and (4) The participants find opportunities for agency, change, and resistance. I heavily rely on sharing the participants' own words (Eldh et al., 2020), rather than my summary and interpretation, in accordance with the MMSI.

In Chapter 8, I further discuss the implications of this research, showing that it fully supports this study's premise of examining professional communicators as a speech community of language workers with a responsibility for language. Finally, in Chapter 9, I conclude by making an argument for incorporating Critical Language Awareness into the teaching and practice of public relations (Darics et al., 2025; Fairclough, 2013; Shapiro, 2021), preparing students and practitioners to have a deeper understanding and appreciation of their responsibility to their organizations and society as storytellers and gatekeepers of information (Hsiao, 2024). In doing so, I also discuss the implications of this dissertation for public relations practice, pedagogy, and theory, including the possible expansion of relationship management, organizational conscience, and role theory.

1.2. Positionality: Examining the field/practice that shaped me

It is viewed as essential in critical scholarship for researchers to actively consider, reflect on, and disclose their relationships with the communities, topics, and concerns they investigate

(Mautner, 2010). This is particularly important in cases where the researcher's identity and experiences significantly overlap with the research topics and participants. That is the case in this dissertation, where I am examining the professional field that I have worked in for most of my adult life and sharing values and beliefs built over a lifetime. As such, I have prepared the following positionality statement to describe the different aspects of my life that have been significant for my interest and approach to this research.

To begin, I am a cisgender White woman in her 40s and a monolingual English speaker. I am an American citizen who was born and raised in Minnesota. I did not know it in childhood, but as an adult, it became clear that I have always struggled with depression and anxiety, plus ADHD and/or Autism. This constellation of experiences often positioned me at the edges of groups—witness to the ways power circulates and words can harm.

I worked for 15 years as a professional communicator in higher education, nonprofit, and political settings. My earliest jobs were on political campaigns, spaces where control of the message was seen as paramount and nonnegotiable (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 2008). I strongly internalized this expectation, viewing this control as the unquestioned mandate of successful communications. Social issues were topics for me to learn and master, as I often worked on areas where I did not have a personal connection or investment.

Before starting my Ph.D., I managed communications at the University of Minnesota for Housing and Residential Life, Global Programs and Strategy Alliance, International Student and Scholar Services, and the Immigration Response Team. I spent most of my career working as a generalist and technician. I then worked my way into leadership roles where I was able to advise leaders about using an audience- and equity-centered lens in communications and organizational decision-making.

I earned a Strategic Communication MA at the University of Minnesota, graduating in 2020. I entered the program firmly believing I wanted to be a communicator for the rest of my life—more specifically, a technician who would remain responsible for crafting messages and executing communications plans. It quickly became clear that I had questions about professional responsibility that went beyond the boundaries of my professional degree or, ultimately, the functionalist view of public relations.

This realization led me to add a minor in Literacy and Rhetorical Studies, offered through the school's writing center (University of Minnesota, 2025). This interdisciplinary minor allowed me to connect with others who cared about issues of power in writing. I crossed over into academic coursework, taking courses alongside K-12 educators and social workers. These classmates spoke candidly with me about the harm they have seen from well-meaning communicators approaching their clients, asking them to do interviews without considering the possibility of harm. For my final Capstone project, I decided to forgo the expected experience of crafting a comprehensive communications plan, instead choosing to interview practitioners working in anti-trafficking organizations to build a case for ethical/equitable storytelling practices (Boone, 2020).

These conversations and the added coursework proved transformational, with me eventually realizing that my understanding of professional responsibility had dramatically changed. It no longer felt like enough to simply focus on meeting my organization's needs or presenting a polished image. Instead, I felt a deep ethical responsibility to the people I was communicating "to and about," meaning my audiences and the people featured in my communications. Ultimately, this led me to enroll in the Communications and Media Studies Ph.D. program at the University of Oregon to continue exploring my concerns and completing

this dissertation.

1.2.1. What this means for me as a scholar

I take space for this discussion at the start of my dissertation because I firmly believe my identity and experiences shape every part of my research. This includes my understanding of the role of public relations within organizations and society, how I understand language and difference, and why I insist on doing research that bridges critical/sociocultural and functionalist scholarship (see Ciszek, 2026; Walton et al., 2019). My research is driven by a deep love of the possibilities of professional communications (Boone, 2023) and a fierce loyalty to the busy, overworked, and often misunderstood practitioners who do it (Creative Comms, 2026). It is also fueled by the frustrations I had as a practitioner who often felt certain there was more that I needed to consider if I wished to be a responsible communicator (Capizzo et al., 2026), but did not know where to look for help.

I join the critical and feminist scholars who view "all knowledge [as] socially and historically constructed and valuationally based" (Lazar, 2007, p. 146). I do not believe it is possible (or advisable) to separate my views and experiences from my research, and I strongly reject positivist expectations for research to be a neutral or objective process. Instead, I expressly address questions that I know are important based on my professional experience (including informal conversations with peers), and I address questions of validity by laying out my thoughts and experiences for my reader.

I insist that my work speaks to application and change because I am intimately familiar with the dissatisfaction[3] working communicators can feel when turning to critical scholarship

[3] This is not meant to argue that critical public relations scholarship has a responsibility to prioritize application or to reassert that critical public relations research must have a "cash value" (Toth, 2002, p. 243). I respect that many critical scholars argue that prioritizing application reinscribes functionalist demands, demanding that critical work be responsive to industry interests (see Ciszek, 2026; Vardeman-Winter, 2015). My position reflects my experience

that compellingly identifies problems but provides few answers about what to do instead (see Boone, 2020). To do this, I draw heavy inspiration from Technical and Professional Communications (Jones et al., 2016; Walton et al., 2019), particularly its view for practitioners as authors and advocates (Slack et al., 1993; Walton et al., 2019).

Relatedly, I insist on writing my research using first-person language as it forces me to continually engage "in a self-reflective and honest assessment" (Esposito, 2024, p. 9) of my privilege and the ways I benefit from the actions/systems I examine. It also ensures that readers are aware of my role in the research, including the subjective decisions that others could decide differently.

1.3. Researcher reflection

Being a public relations scholar has been a humbling experience (Heath, 2006). Many people are certain of what they believe the profession to be, but few seem to know the realities of practice as I see them. I have found myself sitting in an uncomfortable space that is familiar to many who try to create change from within a system (Meyerson, 2001)—I recognize the validity of criticisms while also valuing the possibilities of practice.

Furthermore, in establishing the expectations for this study, it is essential to acknowledge that there are many practical limits to any individual practitioner's ability to make significant decisions (Dombrowski, 2007). Professional communicators are employed to drive success for their organizations (Doh et al., 2024), and employees are sometimes required to communicate decisions they disagree with or find unsatisfactory. In attempting to resolve this, I am reminded of a TPC text, however, and its advice for ethics:

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as a communicator who felt an ethical responsibility to act but needed assistance to envision potential alternatives while I continued to work within the confines of my position and organization.

> As a practical matter, certainly no one thinks that communicators are the only professionals with ethical responsibilities. Technical and professional communicators, after all, are among the least powerful and most vulnerable professionals in a technical organization…. **On the other hand, I think it is a mistake to think in dichotomous all-or-none terms about ethics.** (Dombrowski, 2007, p. 317, emphasis added)

When encountering a new ethical concern, it is easiest to become overwhelmed by the size of the problem, allowing it to seem insurmountable. Dombrowski (2007) reminds readers, however, of the merits of partial and imperfect efforts.

The question and perspective I find missing in the existing scholarship, however, is that of the busy practitioner acting *as a writer*. How do they select language, and, equally importantly, what opportunities are created or lost in those decisions (Edwards, 2018)? What is the unique value communicators bring to their work that Generative Artificial Intelligence cannot simply mimic and replicate?

As the following interviews show, the participants want that conversation. They expressed a strong sense of responsibility for language but also uncertainty about how to navigate ethical concerns in practice. Therefore, in examining communicators as "language workers" (Thurlow, 2017), this dissertation seeks to spur reconsideration of the ways language work is thought about within the practice, research, and teaching of public relations.

CHAPTER 2. Context of the Study

Before fully engaging the research, I wish to first introduce public relations and sociolinguistics. This section helps orient readers to key terminology and my language choices. It is separate from the discussions in the literature review and theoretical framework.

2.1. My language choices

2.1.1. Who are the people?

As mentioned at the start of the introduction, public relations practitioners are called a variety of terms in both scholarship and popular discourse (Flocken, 2019; Hansen-Horn & LaGree, 2020). Tsetsura (2018) examined some of these labels and noted that the terms used to identify a professional are not a matter of semantics or wordplay, but rather a summary of how practitioners think of themselves and present their value to the world.

For this dissertation, I chose to use the term "**communicators**" to refer to public relations professionals and those working in related fields, such as organizational and corporate communications (Simonsson et al., 2025). This is not intended to argue that these fields operate in the same way or are somehow subordinate to public relations. Instead, it highlights the value of the interventions discussed for all forms of communication done with a primary focus on organizational needs and objectives. It also serves to capture the range of experience and expertise the interview participants possess.

More importantly, this terminology signals a central intervention of this project: I seek to reposition writing as language work that is central to professional responsibility. It signals that my dissertation seeks to interrupt the traditional devaluation of technicians in relation to managers.[4] It is a reminder that, even in roles focused on tactics and execution, communicators

[4] While outside the scope of this dissertation, these discussions continually reminded of feminist critiques of the discounting of technicians as "women's work" (Creedon, 1991, p. 68).

make daily decisions that can open or close opportunities for connection and understanding.

Similarly, I use the term "**audiences**," rather than the commonly used term of "publics." This, to begin, was a decision to match the language used by the interview participants. Secondly, it is a philosophical extension of the concerns that the term "publics" instills "a passivity that is highly political" (Demetrious, 2022, p. 15) in removing a focus on the audience as people—one step closer to normalizing marginalization and harm (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023).

2.1.2. What is the subject?

I use the terms "language" and "writing" extensively across this dissertation. These terms may be viewed as interchangeable, but they are analytically distinct for this dissertation.

Writing is treated as the site of professional practice—the activity through which communicators produce texts for an organization. This framing assumes that communicators at all levels make choices about words, tone, presentation, and content, albeit with varying degrees of flexibility and autonomy within organizational hierarchies (see Dombrowski, 2007). Much of this writing is intended to be read by the audience in long form, so it is published through media releases and other written texts. Communicators also work on other forms of texts, including talking points, social media, and speechwriting. This dissertation focuses primarily on the development of formalized texts intended for mass audiences (internal or external). It attends less to everyday forms of language or workplace writing (see Ereaut, 2024; Lillis, 2013).

Language, meanwhile, is viewed as a larger semiotic resource. It is often discussed within public relations research in ways aligning with the transmission model of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949/1998). This dissertation, meanwhile, recognizes language as both a means of transmitting information and a constitutive force. It recognizes that language, stories, and rhetoric carry social significance that shapes how audiences understand them.

This dissertation further argues that communicators function as their organizations' language experts. This means they carry a distinct **responsibility for language** in terms of its technical execution and social significance. This responsibility entails maintaining an ongoing awareness of the ways language evolves and the broader societal narratives it engages. Ultimately, this responsibility is enacted through language decisions and a communicator's internal sense of accountability for their effects (Darics, 2018).

2.2. Terms to know

2.2.1. From sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is "a subfield of linguistics that addresses questions of how social factors (such as race, gender, and class) interact with linguistic features" (Behrens & Parker, 2010, p. 26), including context, users, and functions (Lillis, 2013). It is built on several principles, including (1) the belief that all forms of language[5] are equally valid despite societal hierarchies resulting in some carrying greater prestige, and (2) all languages evolve, with words constantly transitioning in and out of use (Lippi-Green, 2012; Milroy & Milroy, 1985/2012).

One of its concepts is a **speech community**, "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction using a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by distinct differences in language usage" (Gumperz, 1987, p. 219). Speech communities are generally thought of in terms of geographic areas. They can also include other types of groupings, such as **language workers,** professionals who "deal with language as the object and outcome of their work" (Koller, 2018, p. 4; see Thurlow, 2017). This is commonly thought of as including journalists, public relations practitioners, marketers, advertisers, and

[5] Despite this foundation, disability activists note that much of sociolinguistics suffers from a "modality chauvinism" (Henner & Robinson, 2023, p. 12) where spoken language is valued above other forms of language. This has led to the creation of Crip Linguistics and its statement that "no way of languaging is bad" (p. 8). It, therefore, expands its definitions of language to include visual, graphemic, or tactile forms.

aligned professions. Some writers extend the label to include new forms of information workers, like call center employees (Boutet, 2012) and user experience writers (Portmann, 2025).

Another sociolinguistic concept is **language ideologies,** a "shared set of beliefs about language(s) amongst particular social groups" (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2024, para. 2) that govern expectations of how language is shaped. **Prescriptivism** is "…an approach to language focused on what people *should* do" with language that views "linguistic rules as universal, rather than context-specific" (Shapiro, 2021, p. 43, emphasis original). It is often described as being the opposite of **descriptivism** (Abe & Shapiro, 2021), a focus on language use in practice that "recognize[s] and celebrate[s] the existence of all linguistic varieties (i.e., dialects, languages, and styles)" (Shapiro, 2021, p. 43). Prescriptivism can result in **standard(ized)[6] language ideology,** "a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names as its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the speech of the upper, middle class" (Lippi-Green, 2012, p. 67). It is generally thought of as the "correct" or "normal" way of using language (Baker-Bell, 2020), and its enactment follows a process of codification that turns it into required knowledge for those wishing to succeed in mainstream workplaces and environments (Curzan et al., 2023; Milroy & Milroy, 1985/2012). Baker-Bell (2020) notes that formal writing instruction often follows **eradicationist** or **respectability language pedagogies**, with stigmatized forms of language being erased or corrected.

An individual's **metalinguistic awareness** is "the aspect of acquired (or learned) linguistic knowledge which encompasses social factors related to language use, knowledge, distribution, meaning, or occurrence variance" (Wright, 2022, p. 16). This awareness can be

[6] I join scholars like Lippi-Green (2012) and Shapiro (2021) in using "standardized" as a reminder that standardization is an ongoing and intentional action "we do *to language*" (Shapiro, 2021, p. 20, emphasis original).

examined through **metalinguistic interviews,** a sociolinguistic interview format that elicits the interviewee's thoughts about language (**metatalk**). Together, these concepts provide a foundation to discuss how/why people use language and its cultural significance.

2.2.2. From public relations

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) defines **public relations** as "a strategic communication process that builds **mutually beneficial relationships** between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, 2012, para. 3). While often confused by outsiders, this focus on relationships sets public relations apart from other roles. As explained by Roberts (2016):

> **Public relations** emphasizes cultivating relationships between an organization or individual and key publics for the purpose of managing the client's image.
>
> **Marketing** emphasizes the promotion of products and services for revenue purposes.
>
> **Advertising** is a communication tool used by marketers… to get customers to act. (p. 72, emphasis added)

Advertising and marketing focus on an audience's purchasing power, but the primary focus of public relations is to build, protect, and maintain relationships.

The fields also focus on different forms of communication, with public relations targeting **earned media** (like media coverage), while marketing and advertising focuse on paid media. Traditionally, the third-party nature of media coverage has led to earned media being seen as more credible and trustworthy by outsiders, although Jo (2004) noted that argument quality and other factors can mitigate this difference. The importance of public relations practitioners securing media coverage had faded following the introduction of social media. It reemerged recently as "one of the strongest drivers of authority" (Regen Bisbee, 2026, para. 1) with the introduction of Generative Artificial Intelligence, as researchers and practitioners have found

that the platforms are trained to prioritize third-party sources in the search results.

Many practitioners begin in similar entry-level positions. As they advance, however, practitioners dived between **managers** (those responsible for "making communication policy decisions and being held accountable for program success or failure," [Dozier & Broom, 1995, p. 10]) and **technicians** (a "creator and disseminator of messages, intimately involved in production, operating independent of management decision making, strategic planning, issues management, environmental scanning, and program evaluation," [Dozier & Broom, 1995, p. 22]). This division was captured in the **manager-technician dichotomy** introduced by Dozier (1984), although later research acknowledged that there is more overlap than originally described (Dozier, 2008; Napoli et al., 1999).

Applying an **instrumentalist perspective** to language is an approach that views writing "as a means for achieving one's personal goals, as a means of doing work, and as a means of conveying information" (Darics, 2022a, p. 5). One of the major concerns for the instrumentalist instruction in public relations scholarship is teaching students to follow **AP Style** as directed by ***The Associated Press Stylebook* (*AP Stylebook*),** a "source of copy-editing information and reporting guidance" [that] "deals with language on the line-editing level and the content-editing level…" (Cotter, 2014, p. 378). It is considered the professional standard for journalists and, likewise, adopted by public relations practitioners as they prepare materials to share with them.

2.3. Historical background of public relations

Most American accounts of public relations begin in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the emergence of the railroad and other utilities (Cutlip, 1994; Logan, 2014). The early days were referred to as the "**public be damned**" era due to the heavy use of manipulation, propaganda, and stunts to reach clients' goals. This was captured in foundational

texts, like *Public Opinion* by Lippmann (1922) and *Propaganda* by Bernays (1928).

Practices have since evolved, and the dominant narrative of the field now emphasizes a growth "…**from unsophisticated and unethical early roots to planned, strategic, and ethical campaigns of the current day**" (Lamme & Russell, 2009, p. 281). The common understanding of public relations now argues that practitioners must think about more than persuasion in their work, as the caring of relationships is a core part of their duties (Ki et al., 2001/2015).

The mainstream theory of public relations argues that the field has gone through four periods as captured by the four models of public relations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). They are (1) **Press Agentry**: A one-way form of communication focused solely on meeting their client's needs; (2) **Public Information**: A one-way form of communication where the practitioner serves as an in-house journalist; (3) **Two-way asymmetrical model**: A two-way form of communication where the focus remains largely on the organization and its and objectives, but the public has limited opportunities to give feedback; and (4) **Two-way symmetrical model**: A two-way form of communication that advances the needs of both the organization and the public. Some scholars (Mundy, 2021) argue that the field has advanced to its next phase, where the public has the power to demand greater consideration and engagement from organizations.

Public relations theory took a significant turn in the 1980s when **relationship management** became a key focus. Ferguson (1984/2018) first made the case for this shift while arguing for the need for a unifying theory for the field. Ledingham later formalized the shift when introducing the concept of **organization-public relationships**, defined as "the state which exists between an organization and its key publics in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and/or cultural well-being of the other entity" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). The public was no longer viewed just as a prize to be won or moved within this

view. Instead, practitioners needed to care about the quality and integrity of these relationships as captured through 11 dimensions: **trust**, **openness**, **credibility**, **emotion**, **intimacy**, **similarity**, **immediacy**, **agreement**, **issue perception**, and **shared interests** (Ledingham, 2003). This concept also provided momentum for those who wished to shift public relations **from a communications to a management function**, making **reputation management** a primary concern and leaving writing and other tasks to be vehicles for action (Hutton et al., 2001).

Another significant moment was when Grunig introduced the **situational theory of publics** (Grunig, 2005; Grunig & Hunt, 1984). It argues that organizations have many publics that become more or less engaged based on (1) **issue recognition**, (2) **constraint awareness**, and (3) **level of involvement**. It further argues that organizations will be most effective when they understand these concerns, monitor latent publics, and manage active publics.

Critical and sociocultural scholars, meanwhile, argue that the field's corporate allegiances and managerial focus have "functioned to philosophically and practically distance public relations from ethical and moral concerns" (Logan, 2016, p. 95; see Waymer & Dyson, 2011), such as race. Edwards and Hodges (2011), therefore, called for a **socio-cultural turn** in public relations research, saying:

> [Scholarship] frames public relations in a way that excludes the interests of increasingly diverse audiences; it ignores the dynamics produced by the profession pursuing its interests; and **it does not address the role that public relations plays as a discursive force in society**; shaping social and cultural values and beliefs to legitimize certain interests over others. (p. 16, emphasis added)

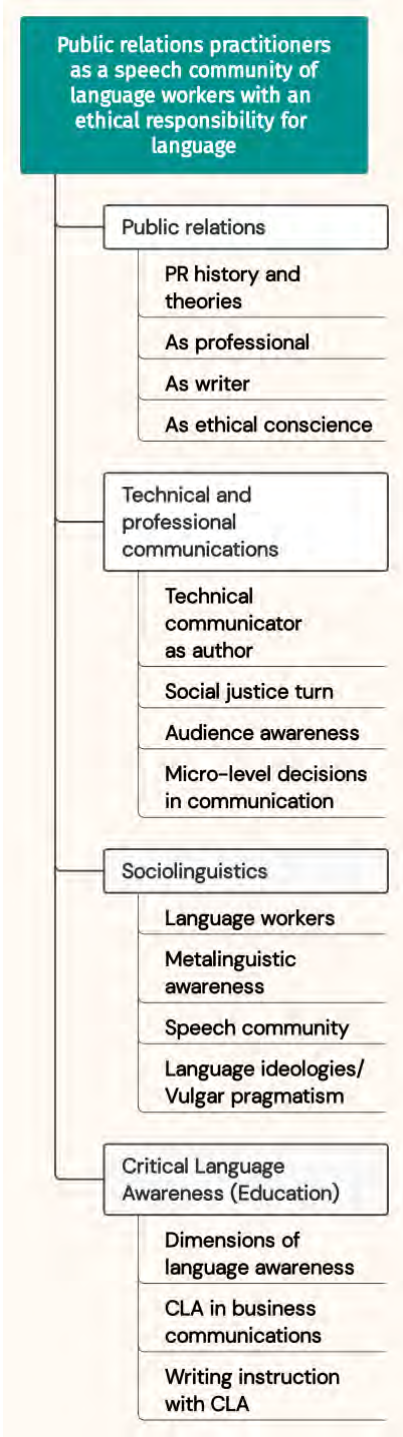
In this view, the corporate focus has allowed public relations to ignore its effects on society. In the next chapter, I will introduce the literature that provides the foundation of this dissertation.

CHAPTER 3. Literature review

In the previous chapter, I provided foundational knowledge to help orient those readers not familiar with public relations or sociolinguistics. Across the literature review and theoretical framework, I will share interdisciplinary research assembled to support this dissertation (see Figure 1 for a conceptual view of the interdisciplinary framework).

To begin, I present three research clusters significant for explaining the experiences communicators have in the workplace related to language and ethics: (1) the professional, (2) the writer, and (3) the ethical actor. I conclude by discussing linguists' interests in journalists, noting that public relations has not received the same attention.

Figure 1: Conceptual view of the interdisciplinary framework



3.1. Situating the communicator

Communicators must do many things within the workplace. Here, I present a literature review arranged around three fundamental segments of a communicator's role in relation to language and ethics: (1) the professional, (2) the writer, and (3) the ethical actor. I am not arguing that all communicators fulfill all these roles every day, but understanding these three pillars helps

illuminate the workplace experience and expectation.

3.1.1. As professionals

Since its emergence, communicators and scholars have sought to demonstrate the field's professionalization (Hansen-Horn & LaGree, 2020; Logan, 2014). This was a driving force for the creation of the PRSA Code of Ethics, a voluntary statement of the principles and values underlying the industry that applies to all those who join PRSA (Fitzpatrick, 2002).

As communicators increasingly sought entrance to their organization's leadership teams (referred to as the "C-suite" or "dominant coalition"), educational programs increasingly shifted to incorporate lessons about business concerns (Dühring, 2015; Turk, 2006). The interest in positioning public relations as a management and organizational function drew attention away from its role as a communicative function, even as social media emerged.

Communicators can be found in all sectors and sizes of organizations. They are commonly employed either by a single organization (referred to as working "in-house"), independently as consultants, or within agencies that have contracts to provide services to multiple clients. Work teams also vary. Those working for large companies or agencies often are afforded the opportunity to specialize in specific issues or forms of communication (Peirson-Smith, 2014). Communicators working in nonprofit and small organizations often work as generalists due to being their organization's only communicator (Nonprofit Marketing Guide, LLC, 2025). Communicators are also often referred to as "boundary spanners" (Aldrich & Herker, 1977, p. 217) due to their role in linking an organization to its audiences.

Roles in an organization. Communicators increasingly specialize as they progress, choosing to either (1) seek management positions where they advise senior leaders and manage others or (2) continue as technicians who do daily communications tasks but are unlikely to be

part of organizational decision-making. Broom and Smith (1979) proposed five conceptual role models for these roles: Expert prescriber, technical services provider, communication process facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator, and acceptance legitimizer. Yue et al. (2025) further examined these roles within the context of DEI, and they proposed a new categorization of possible roles: Strategic advisors and thought partners; connectors and cultural shapers; moral advocates and champions; storytellers and wordsmiths; and role models. Regardless of their role or level, Napoli et al. (1999) found writing continues to be a key activity throughout communicators' careers.

3.1.2. As writers

Communicators are expected to draft all forms of communication, with a specific focus on persuasive communications (Zappala, 2010). They create a large variety of specialized texts, including press releases, promotional materials, web content, social media posts, speeches, and direct mail appeals (Courtright & Smudde, 2011; Lane & Johnston, 2017). These items are often drafted with a focus on organizational objectives and what needs to happen to get readers to act. Writers use tools to negotiate meaning with readers, including intertextual references, metaphors, narratives, and stories (Blyler, 1992). Communicators do not regularly receive attribution or retain ownership of the texts they create, instead writing under the name (and authority) of their organization or a specified individual (Findlay, 2019).

This requires communicators to modify their personal voice and writing style to better match their organization, speaker, and/or audience (Findlay, 2019; Waters et al., 2026). Communicators are trained to adopt an organizational or corporate voice, defined in strategic communication scholarship as "… the communicative apparatus corporate organizations use to address a wide range of publics, stakeholders, audiences, or constituencies" that "expresses the

collective will of the corporate entity as determined by the corporation's most dominant or influential members" (Logan & Tindall, 2018, p. 3). From a strategic perspective, the corporate voice can be thought of as a humanizing tool developed to increase identification and emotional connection between an organization and its audience, bypassing the traditional hostility felt toward corporations as powerful societal forces (Logan, 2014). Linguistically, the corporate voice is understood to be a highly formal and standardized style of writing and speaking (Darics & Koller, 2019), although organizations have increasingly adopted more conversational tones with the growth of social media and the internet (Gretry et al., 2017; Kelleher, 2009). In practice, the corporate voice is often criticized for overemphasizing the positive and relying on linguistic strategies that introduce ambiguity and confusion about meaning, such as doublespeak and euphemisms (Llewellyn & Harrison, 2006; Lutz, 1996). This has become known colloquially as "corporate bullshit," defined in Littrell (2026) as "…a type of semantically, logically, or epistemically dubious information that is misleadingly impressive, important, informative, or otherwise engaging" ("What bullshit is," para. 1, emphasis removed).

Many organizations rely on style guides to coordinate the execution of this voice (Bright, 2005). They are customized texts created to document the specific decisions made around tone and personality, along with spelling and grammatical conventions. The construction of these guides often begins with standards developed by third-party institutional authorities, such as the *Associated Press Stylebook* (AP Style; Froke et al., 2022), *The Chicago Manual of Style* (The University of Chicago Press Editorial Staff, 2024), or the *Publication Manual for the American Psychological Association* (American Psychological Association, 2020). Some also look to community-focused guides, like *The Conscious Style Guide* (Yin, 2024; see Durazzi, 2022).

All undergraduate students graduating from accredited public relations programs are

required to take at least one course addressing public relations writing (CPRE, 2017), and graduate programs are also encouraged to offer specialized writing instruction (Kinsky & Wallace, 2025). These courses generally take a "technique-oriented approach" (Anwer, 2020, p. 213) to teaching students the various genres, techniques, and craft of writing,[7] including the importance of establishing key messages so materials can easily be repurposed across mediums (Lane & Johnston, 2017). Classes provide experiential and learning-by-doing forms of teaching (Bhalla & Hawkins-Jedlicka, 2025; Meganck & Smith, 2019), with advanced coursework going in-depth on individual topics, like speechwriting (Mapes, 2025). Many students also gain writing experience through internships (Waters et al., 2026), and students are encouraged to build portfolios by the time they graduate (Bhalla & Hawkins-Jedlicka, 2025).

The writing coursework requirements were put into place due to continual concerns about graduates' writing ability once they entered the workplace (Hardin & Pompper, 2004). These concerns have been a frequent topic for the Commission of Public Relations Education (CPRE), with the matter being discussed in the group's first report on public relations education (1975) and remaining a constant subject since (CPRE, 1999, 2017, 2020, 2023; Turk, 2006).

Hardin and Pompper (2004) again raised concerns in 2000, citing concerns that news and writing skills were being deprioritized in the curriculum, due to an increased interest in business knowledge.[8] They found that only half of the public relations programs they examined required courses on public relations writing, with fewer including a focus on journalistic writing standards.

[7] In an examination of Australian programs, Lane and Johnston (2017) found public relations programs taught 16 different writing genres and 104 writing techniques. They further noted that public relations courses teach as many as seven genres in an individual class, while journalism courses focus on one genre per term. I could not find a similar accounting for American courses.

[8] "Is it possible that basic writing skills inadvertently have been overshadowed by expanded public relations curricula that include business and marketing courses?" (Hardin & Pompper, 2004, p. 357)

More recent examinations of public relations job postings indicate that strong writing skills remain important (Bernhard & Russmann, 2023; Meganck & Smith, 2019). Waters et al. (2026), for example, quoted one employer as labeling weak writing skills in recent graduates as be "a deal-breaker," (p. 157) noting they value an individual's writing ability equally as evidence of the individual's critical reasoning skills. Many employers, however, continue to say that recent graduates enter the workforce more prepared to do academic writing than strategic communication (Lane & Johnston, 2017).

The press release. The largest area of existing sociolinguistics research examines the genre of the press release (Catenaccio, 2022). Genre analysis is a subsection of discourse analysis and pragmatics (Barron & Schneider, 2014), and it argues that each genre has characteristics that are shaped by the context of the communication (Curzan & Adams, 2007).

Press releases have multiple functions. In their most basic sense, a press release is issued to make public some form of information that was private (McLaren, 2005). The texts are not objective or neutral, as they are sent to journalists with the hope that they will favorably report the information discussed (Pander Maat, 2022). Jacobs (1999) therefore argued that press releases are unique publications, created with the express intent of being "told only to be retold" (p. 1, emphasis removed). Journalists are frequently described as viewing press releases skeptically, however, since they think of them as attempts to obtain free advertising (Curtin, 1999).

An interest in fulfilling journalists' needs has driven the historical development of format and style of the press release. Communicators wish to make it easy for journalists to either paraphrase or use the text as their own in media coverage (Jacobs, 1999; McLaren, 2005; Pander Maat, 2022). Linguistically, press releases are written in the third person, despite often being

about the sender. They feature self-references, self-quotations, and "explicit semi-performatives" (Jacobs, 1999, p. 14), text where the relaying of the news is also the action (such as announcements that state "we are proud to announce…"). The format of a press release is pre-formulated (Catenaccio, 2022; Jacobs, 1999; Sleurs & Jacobs, 2005). The writing follows the basic format journalists use of presenting an inverted pyramid, where the most important information is communicated quickly, followed by quotes and additional details. Researchers have noted that the quotations are commonly drafted by communicators, instead of the person quoted (Sleurs et al., 2003).

There are many reasons why communicators and students need to learn this pre-formulated format. As Barron and Schneider (2014) noted when speaking of genre analysis broadly, understanding the rules for writing press releases can become a form of "gatekeeping" (p. 14)—indeed, the wire editor in White's (1950) foundational gatekeeping study noted rejecting several announcements due to disliking the way they were written. Additionally, while practices are shifting with the introduction of artificial intelligence and social media, writing press releases has consistently been a primary job for new graduates, with earlier experience expected (Brunner et al., 2018; see Bowen, 2014). Finally, press releases are often written collaboratively (Bremner, 2014), so a shared basic understanding is needed for language and style.

Noting the impact of GenAI. There is also increasing research on the use of GenAI for writing. A survey by Muck Rack (2025) found that 72 percent of responding communicators reported using GenAI to write a first draft of a message, while 70 percent reported using it to edit. Others used AI to assist with repurposing messages across social media channels, ensuring brand standards remain consistent when images are resized (Fajardo, 2026).

PRSA's Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS, 2023) published guidance about the ethical use of AI. It discussed potential problems and concerns, including the potential for AI to create fake information or quotes. Therefore, BEPS advised communicators:

> Rather than letting AI solely dictate the content, use the technology as a supplementary tool, guiding it with precise prompts and rigorously editing its outputs. This ensures the final product is created with AI assistance, not purely AI authorship. (p. 8)

The guidance, therefore, stated that communicators should use AI as a tool rather than a content creator. The Institute for Public Relations similarly advised that organizations take a "human-in-the-loop" approach that allows AI to play a role while still requiring that "final outputs… be shaped by professional judgment, organizational voice, and ethical standards" (Fajardo, 2026, p. 19). In doing so, these organizations sought to balance the potential time and cost savings made with a communicator's duty to ensure the accuracy and quality of their communication.

3.1.3. As ethical actors

As I previously discussed in Boone (2025), communicators argue that public relations is an extension of beliefs found in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution (Fitzpatrick, 2006a). As explained by Cutlip (1994):

> The social justification for public relations in a free society is to ethically and effectively plead the cause of a client or organization in the free-wheeling forum of public debate. It is a basic democratic right that every idea, individual, and institution shall have a full and fair hearing in the public forum—and that their merit ultimately must be determined by their ability to be accepted in the marketplace. (p. xii)

Whether representing individuals, issues, or corporations, the legitimacy of public relations is tied to providing access to the "marketplace of ideas" (Fitzpatrick, 2006b, Chapter 1) for both

the sender (client) and receiver (audience) of a message. This connection to the First Amendment has also been used to reject calls for formal licensure (Page et al., 2024), a commonly discussed topic when ethical questions arise. Public relations remains a self-regulated industry, leaving it reliant on and limited by communicators' judgment and critical awareness (Boone, 2025).

This ethical view has been operationalized in the United States through a variety of models based on utilitarian, deontological, Jungian, Kantian, and other philosophies (Bowen, 2024; Edwards, 2018; Fawkes, 2015; Harrison & Galloway, 2005; Neill et al., 2024). Many focus on validating the use of persuasion (Baker, 1999) and advancing an organization's self-interest (Edwards, 2018), such as the attorney-adversary model (Barney & Black, 1994) or the TARES test for persuasive communication (Baker & Martinson, 2001). Other approaches—particularly those informed by critical, constructivist, feminist, and postmodern perspectives—position communicators as advocates or agents of change within their organizations (Holtzhausen, 2012; Weder, 2021). Scholars also regularly consider the feasibility of creating a universal ethical code that could be used across industries, countries, and cultures (Hunt & Tirpok, 1993). They also defined a finite set of "last resort approaches" (Neill et al., 2024, p. 122) for unethical situations that cannot be resolved, including whistleblowing or resignation.

Organizational conscience. It is also argued that communicators should serve as an organization's ethical advocate (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Fitzpatrick & Gauthier, 2001) or organizational conscience (Bowen, 2008; Neill, 2023; Ryan & Martinson, 1983; Yue et al., 2025). As described by Neill and Drumwright (2012):

> An 'organizational conscience' is a professional who raises concerns when his or her organization's actions might bring about potential ethical problems leading to troubling

> consequences for various parties, who may be individuals, groups, organizations, or other entities (e.g., the natural environment) both within and outside the organization. This professional is concerned not only with issues that involve the law but also with issues that encompass the spirit of the law and issues the law may not address. (p. 221)

This model argues that communicators have a responsibility to speak when their organization considers actions that could be ethically problematic, even if they are lawful. This responsibility holds that public relations professionals are the ideal people to advise leaders on ethical decision-making due to their focus on "balancing organizational and constituent interests" (Hon & Brunner, 2000, p. 336), rather than a narrow focus on profitability, operations, legality, or other concerns.

Bowen and Erzikova (2013) noted the differing approaches to ethical instruction taken in the United States and Europe, with the former focusing on teaching professionalism and compliance, while European lessons encourage autonomy and critical thinking. This has led in the United States to professional ethics commonly being taught as adherence to frameworks, like the PRSA Code of Ethics (Public Relations Society of America, 2000). These guides provide specific principles, guidance, and examples, but communicators must use their judgment when encountering ethical decisions beyond them (Boone, 2025). Place (2015) found that communicators rely on informal methods of analysis and lessons learned from experience, using terms like "'gut checks'" or an "'ethical sixth sense'" (p. 258).

3.2. Describing linguistic perspectives of journalists and communicators

Journalism has been a focus for linguists with attention to the discourse (Cotter, 2010a) and linguistics of news production (Catenaccio et al., 2011), along with the language ideologies journalists hold (Vaicekauskienė, 2012). Linguists find journalists a particularly interesting

subject since many "self-identify as 'protectors' of the language" while also "engaging in prescriptive routines at every level of practice, and… respond[ing] to the cultural zeitgeist, promoting linguistic innovation or reacting to it" (Cotter, 2014, p. 371). For example, Cotter (2014) examined changes made in the *AP Stylebook*, the industry-accepted rulebook for journalistic writing. Cotter argued that its guidance served as "a tool for [language] standardization" as its expectations are viewed as community norms and accepted knowledge. In particular, Cotter (2014) determined that the goals of the *AP Stylebook* are to ease comprehension for readers by developing consistency in writing across outlets and platforms. Cotter (2014) also discussed the ways new entries are added and deleted from the stylebook as words come in and out of use. Many of these changes become deeply contested within the journalism community (VanEyk & Curzan, 2025), and, therefore, changes lag behind other entities and societal conversations (DiNicola, 1994).

Chávez (2021) similarly examined National Public Radio (NPR) to determine what editorial decisions have been made to create consistency in its broadcasts. Based on interviews and historical research, he described the creation of "the NPR voice" (Chávez, 2021, p. 62), the on-air voice and vocabulary all broadcasters are mandated to use. He described the voice as being "like a wise friend that has a lot of information," (Chávez, 2021, p. 62) however he also noted that "highly standardized" (p. 58) voice created an "idealized dialect" (p. 62) through eliminating all regional and ethnic differences in speech and pronunciation.

Linguists have also examined the linguistic practices of other forms of professional communication (Haase, 2009), including advertising (Edouihri, 2024), marketing (Kelly-Holmes, 2019), and speechwriting (Mapes, 2025). They acknowledge, however, that public relations has largely escaped academic attention, leaving it "neglected from a language point of

view" (Jacobs, 2019, p. 56). Jacobs (2019), for example, wrote a linguistic ethnographic account of a group of university scientists who worked with their institution's public relations office to share new research with the media. It noted the communicators urged the scientists to modify their language to better fit the journalistic standards, although the journalists interviewed said they did not expect this from subject matter experts. Other linguists and discourse analysts have examined linguistic questions related to institutional rhetoric (Mayr, 2010) and propaganda (Majewska, 2025), focusing on the texts and how they shape discourse.

Muam et al. (2026), meanwhile, completed a bibliometric and thematic examination of whether and how applied linguistics has appeared in public relations research. They found that the research is increasing but fragmented, with many scholars publishing singular articles. They further identified five thematic clusters for the research: Artificial Intelligence and Natural Language Processing, Digital and Social Media Communication, Health Communication, Discourse and Organizational Communication, and Cross-Cultural Communication.

3.3. Chapter conclusion

Taken together, the public relations research shows the roles public relations communicators play within organizations. They are not simply professionals, writers, or ethical actors—they must be all three at once. Notably, despite public relations commonly being taught within journalism schools, the area where I found the least amount of research was items focused on communicators as writers—necessitating that I look to other fields, like corporate communication, business communications, TPC, linguistics, and composition, along with the specialized training in English for Specialized Purposes. This dissertation addresses this gap through interviews with communicators describing how they approach writing in practice. In the next chapter, I will introduce my theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 4. Theoretical framework

In the previous chapter, I shared several significant research clusters regarding how communicators relate to language and ethics. Here, I will share the theoretical framework that serves as the background of this dissertation. It is interdisciplinary (CohenMiller & Pate, 2019), bringing together three fields: (1) Sociolinguistics, (2) Technical and Professional Communications (TPC), and (3) Critical Language Awareness (CLA). Individually and joined together, these fields provide tools to better understand how communicators think about language and professional responsibility.

This framework is built upon the current understanding within public relations of organizational conscience theory (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012). While traditional academic conversations generally focus on communicators who are part of the dominant coalition, this dissertation proposes that there is an ethical imperative for ***all*** communicators to consider the significance of their language and rhetorical decisions. This is a responsibility that can be considered at all levels, from recent graduates writing individual communications to senior leaders guiding communications departments and counseling the head of their organizations.

4.1. Using sociolinguistics to reposition communicators as a speech community

As stated in CHAPTER 3, this study draws on sociolinguistics to learn more about how the field of public relations is shaped by and shapes language. Sociolinguistics is an academic field divided from broader linguistics examinations due to a focus on the use of language in social contexts. Linguistics focuses on (1) Chomsky's interest in the practices, structure, and grammar of an ideal language user (Lillis, 2013), or (2) de Saussure's (1915) interest in the "arbitrariness of the linguistic sign" (Milroy & Milroy, 1985/2012, p. 10).

4.1.1. Speech community

A speech community is a group of people with shared speech practices and norms. Speech communities are often thought of in terms of geographic boundaries (for example, see Labov, 1986, for his examination of New York accents and their connection to social class). Speech communities can also be defined in other ways, including groups of professionals who do the same or similar work. For example, Thompson (1991) proposed examining technical communicators as a speech community. While similar, speech communities differ from other language-related terms, such as discourse communities or communities of practice (see Lillis, 2013, Chapter 5). These concepts do not get to the communicator's daily experience, choices, and norms, however. This dissertation, therefore, adopts the view that public relations communicators constitute a professional speech community.

4.1.2. Language ideologies

People carry a complex set of ideologies that inform how they conceptualize and react to language (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1998/2016). These ideologies shape the individual's beliefs about language, including what ways they think are correct (Behrens & Parker, 2010; Curzan et al., 2023). These language ideologies can govern how individuals respond to individuals using non-standard dialects or other variations, opening the possibility of linguistic discrimination, "a broad range of practices, actions and experiences, which share a common core of an unfair treatment of a person on the basis of their language" (Drożdżowicz & Peled, 2024, p. 2, emphasis original). Broadly speaking, language ideologies are divided between instrumental (those who view language as an object to be used) and constitutive approaches (those who view language as a meaning-making).

Instrumentalism. A central concept for this dissertation's examination of language

ideologies is the idea of instrumentalism, a language ideology that views language as a tool to be used to achieve an end rather than a valued form of meaning-making. This is a frequent discussion topic in sociolinguistics. It is also increasingly invoked in business communications, with scholars like Weniger and Kan (2013) using it to discuss Singapore's language policies and how they shape their efforts in teaching business communication.

Vulgar pragmatism. Pennycook (1997) and Cherryholmes (1988) further explained language through the separation of critical and vulgar pragmatism. Vulgar pragmatism is defined as a focus on the "functional efficiency" of language that results in the "unreflective acceptance of explicit and implicit standards, conventions, rules and discourse-practices that we find around us" (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 151; see Pennycook, 1997). It is contrasted with critical pragmatism, the result of "a sense of crisis… when it is accepted that our standards, beliefs, values, guiding texts, and discourse-practices themselves require evaluation and appraisal" (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 151). The idea was initially put forward by Cherryholmes (1988) for discussions of language instruction broadly, but it has been most heavily utilized after Pennycook (1997) applied it to instruction for English for Specific Purposes. This dissertation accepts vulgar pragmatism as the industry's default language ideology.

4.1.3. Language workers

Scholars have proposed several terms to discuss individuals who engage professionally in writing and language use in the new information economy. Thurlow (2017), for example, introduced the sociolinguistic term "language workers" to refer to professionals for whom "language is not only an essential skill… but the very product of that work" (p. 328). Later, Thurlow (2019) also proposed the words "wordsmiths" and "wordsmithery" to refer to elite forms of language work (including professionals who use language for significant reasons, such

as judges, dialect coaches, and translators), while Brandt (Brandt, 2015) introduced the term "workaday writers" to label "denote those who write as a routine part of their work, whose pay depends to some degree on their writing literacy, who often write anonymously and ephemerally" (p. 12). More broadly, scholars have also proposed the idea of "knowledge workers," professionals whose "primary purpose… involves the creation, distribution, or application of knowledge" (Davenport, 2008, p. 10).

Critical scholars from composition and English departments are frequently skeptical of the labor expectations tied to professional writing, referring to the practice of demanding that workplace writers develop texts without ownership or attribution as "ghostwriting" (Findlay, 2019; Gallagher, 2024). They view the practice as "exploitative" since "*writing* is valued in a way that *writers* are not" (Findlay, 2019, p. 434, emphasis original), an arrangement that allows the communicators to be seen as interchangeable. Some composition scholars have acknowledged there could be value in critically examining the practice within the classroom, providing students with experience and a moral footing before they encounter it in the workplace (Gallagher, 2024).[9] This study accepts language workers as a professional identity.

4.2. Following Technical and Professional Communications in attending to questions of language and other micro-level decisions

I turn to another field of professional communicators to further explain the need for this ethical imperative that attends to the micro-level decisions of language work: Technical and Professional Communications (TPC). Both public relations and TPC emerged at similar points in history near the beginning of the 20th century as corporate methods for managing the demands

[9] "As I've suggested, ghostwriting is a particularly rich site for investigating these questions precisely because it's… well, complicated. Even what seem to be clear-cut exploitative labor practices in the study participants' workplace experiences brought significant benefits for the students, at least in their views" (Gallagher, 2024, p. 206)

of the Industrial Revolution (Jones, 2016; Logan, 2014). There has since been significant divergence in the industries' operations and research, however.

4.2.1. Practitioners as author

Like mass communication, traditional TPC models were built based on the transmission of communication (Shannon & Weaver, 1949/1998). This mathematically based model envisions a sender (for TPC, an engineer or their surrogate) encoding a message that is then delivered to the receiver (an audience member). Their goal is to ensure the clear transmission of the message without noise or other interference. The transmission model views this as a linear process, without ethical significance.

Slack et al. (1993), meanwhile, proposed a new articulation model in TPC that viewed communication as a negotiation between the sender and receiver, revealing the sender (a communicator) to be an author. This vision of communication draws attention to the sender's actions and intention, positioning them as ethically responsible for those choices. In this model, meaning is co-constructed, with the sender choosing to state or hide particular information. This dissertation, therefore, adopts Slack et al.'s (1993) conception of practitioners as authors, professionals charged with leading the "ongoing struggle to articulate and rearticulate meaning" (p. 14).

4.2.2. Expectation of advocacy

Authorship in and of itself, however, does not ensure ethical practice. TPC has built an expectation of focusing on the audience into its core ethos, positioning "advocacy as its core mandate" (Agboka & Dorpenyo, 2022, p. 6). This ethical imperative was made apparent when Miller (1979) authored a foundational article, "A Humanistic Rationale for Technical Writing." The article argued that responsible TPC could not be thought of only in terms of technical

proficiency, saying there must be a shift in focus to a deeper understanding of the audience's position and an appreciation of community. This led to significant scholarship, including a social justice turn in TPC scholarship (Jones et al., 2016; Walton et al., 2019) and advocacy to interrupt the ways technical communication operates to legitimize and support systems of oppression (Agboka & Dorpenyo, 2022).

Communicators' ethical responsibility has been reinforced throughout the years by further examination, such as attention to the ways an appeal to efficiency was used to justify language, authorial choices, and harm in Nazi Germany (Katz, 1992). This responsibility has also led technical communicators to discuss their role in other choices that could limit a reader's ability to access information, such as digital accessibility concerns (Huntsman, 2025).

Due to these influences, TPC literature evolved to include a focus on practitioners' daily micro-level decisions, such as language (Durazzi, 2022), pictures (Agbozo et al., 2025), and the editing process (Clem & Cheek, 2022; Graves & Graves, 1998). Tillery (2001) further reinforced this focus when positing that the act of writing creates a series of ethical choices that can easily be overlooked, noting:

> …ethical writing entails a delicate negotiation between the demands of the workplace and the demands of a greater society, and no writing task, no matter how seemingly trivial, is immune from the pressures of the power structure. (p. 113)

Every document in the workplace can be the result of ethical negotiation. Without intentional intervention, these decisions will likely continue the organization's existing processes.

This dissertation, therefore, adopts TPC's understanding of professional responsibility, viewing communicators as authors who make daily micro-level decisions with ethical significance. These micro-level decisions include language choices, like word choice and tone.

This is a responsibility they take on due to their role in creating communications that shape how individuals see people, issues, and the world around them.

4.3. Allowing Critical Language Awareness to deepen language conversations

While an awareness of sociolinguistic concepts and TPC better explains how communicators organize around, use, and think about language, the descriptive examination cannot speak to the need for an ethical imperative. For that, I turn to Critical Language Awareness (CLA), specifically as it was described by Shapiro (2021) and Darics et al. (2025).

Critical Language Awareness (CLA) was first proposed in the United Kingdom in the 1990s as a discussion of how power operates in and through language (Clark et al., 1990; Fairclough, 1989/2015). It has been most widely embraced in language learning classrooms for teaching secondary and heritage language instruction. It was subsequently brought to the composition classrooms, including first-year college writing seminars (Shapiro, 2021). Scholars are now calling on it to be expanded to other professional fields with books, like *Language Awareness in Business and the Professions* (Darics, 2022b), and articles addressing business communication (Koester, 2022; Weninger & Kan, 2013), international business (Barner-Rasmussen et al., 2024), entrepreneurship (Parhankangas & Darics, 2022), investor relations (Palmieri, 2022), and management education (Brandhorst, 2019; Darics, 2019).

Shapiro (2021) wrote *Cultivating Critical Language Awareness in the Writing Classroom* to discuss what CLA means for writers and how this can be encouraged during writing instruction. The text was created for writing instructors at all educational levels who wish to foster students' critical understanding and appreciation of language. Shapiro argued that CLA instruction sits at the intersection of pragmatic and progressive teaching philosophies, a space where teachers aim to give students the technical knowledge necessary to understand the rules of

Standardized English (SE), while also challenging students to question why language rules exist. As Shapiro described it:

> CLA pedagogy is an approach to language and literacy education that focuses on the intersections of language, identity, power, and privilege **to promote self-reflection, social justice, and rhetorical agency**. A CLA approach to writing instruction aims to promote a more just future, while also preparing students for the (often unjust) present. CLA pedagogy does not ignore the power of academic norms and other linguistic standards (i.e., the status quo), but aims to demystify, critique, and—at times—resist those norms and standards. (pp. 13-14, emphasis added)

Shapiro (2021) argued that instructors do not need to choose between preparing students for the demands of current society and resisting demands for conformity; CLA allows them to encourage a dual awareness of both. They further named the three goals of CLA pedagogy: (1) encouraging students to engage in continual self-reflection, (2) fostering their awareness of social justice, including the significance of identity, and (3) engendering a sense of rhetorical agency.

Darics et al. (2025) further argued that CLA should be thought of as a "core, future-oriented metacognitive competency" (p. 1) to be taught across the curriculum and workforce as a step to responsible citizenship. To enable this, they proposed a framework of five dimensions of language awareness, breaking down different types of understanding and appreciation for language's significance (see Table 1). They were (1) Metalinguistic awareness, meaning an individual's ability to understand the formal properties of language and their effects, (2) Awareness of linguistic diversity, meaning an appreciation for all forms of language expression as equal, (3) Functional-pragmatic awareness, meaning an appreciation for the usefulness of

Table 1: Dimensions of Language Awareness	
Metalinguistic awareness	Identifying formal and functional properties of language and multimodal communication
Awareness of linguistic diversity	Appreciating language variation and diversity across speakers, setting, and sociopolitical structures
Functional-pragmatic awareness	Knowing effective language use as appropriateness in context
Awareness of ideology	Recognizing how language is shaped by and helps (re)produce systems of belief, power, and social organization
Constitutive awareness	Understanding that language not only reflects reality, but actively constructs it
Source: Darics et al. (2025)	

language and whether uses are appropriate in context, (4) Awareness of ideology, meaning an understanding that language choices can support existing systems of power while also disempowering others, and (5) Constitutive awareness meaning language's ability to create realities—rather than simply describe them.

They further argued that a general awareness of these concerns is not enough. They, instead, argued that CLA's transformative potential is in encouraging people to travel a path of awareness to activism, with an assumption that individuals begin in awareness before progressing to (1) agency, meaning the reflection on and an adjustment of one's own language, (2) advocacy, engaging individuals to take public positions on language concerns to encourage broader change, and (3) activism, directing people to engage in collective and systematic efforts to interrupt and challenge dominant narratives. This dissertation draws on this understanding of Critical Language Awareness as an ethical imperative since, as Darics et al. (2025) argued:

> In our time marked by epistemic instability, discursive overload, and interconnected global crises, it is no longer sufficient for people to decode language**; they must be**

> **equipped to question it, redesign it, and use it ethically to shape more just and sustainable futures**. (p. 1, emphasis added)

It is no longer enough to simply name problems and harms. Instead, communicators must both recognize and appreciate the power that sits in their daily decisions about language and how it is used with audiences.

4.4. Bringing it together: Repositioning communicators as a speech community of language workers with a professional responsibility for language

Communicators have a vested interest in language similar to journalists and technical communicators, but the research on the industry's language and writing practices is relatively limited (Edwards, 2018, Chapter 3; Hardin & Pompper, 2004). As Heath and Frandsen (2008) argued, this seems to be a rather limited examination for a field tied to the creation and transmission of messages, shared understanding, and relationships. The ideas and messages communicators share do not simply exist; they must be selected and maintained through language—and yet, these questions are left unexamined by the scholars most interested in demonstrating how success can be achieved (Blyler, 1992).

Critical public relations scholars, meanwhile, have done specific examinations of the language of public relations. In one example, Demetrious (2022) examined the industry's role in establishing and promoting "plastic words," a term coined by Pörksen (1995) to describe terms that have been inserted into everyday language that carry positive connotations while having an unfixed and hollow meaning. Demetrious (2022) argues that these terms (such as "communication" or "identity") were constructed to enable the acceptance of neoliberal ideas and its "ruthlessly instrumental and market-driven approach to communication" (p. 26).

Curry Jansen (2017), meanwhile, examined how communicators use framing and other

language devices to strategically insert themselves "between the event and the report of the event" (p. 10) to control media coverage to benefit their clients. This research is often criticized by normative scholars, however, as too abstract and removed from application (Vardeman-Winter, 2015).

In proposing this project's theoretical framework (examining communicators as a speech community of language workers with a professional responsibility for language), this research seeks to find a middle ground: a focus on helping the busy communicators be successful while also maintaining an awareness of the power, responsibility, and potential for harm they hold as the person who creates and publishes an organization's words, pictures, and stories. It proposes that communicators cannot think of their work as being complete until they intentionally attend to these concerns, like whether their language is inclusive and communications are accessible.

4.5. Researcher reflection

This project stems from a persistent tension I have experienced in practice: valuing the possibilities of strategic communication while also recognizing its limitations (Boone, 2023; see Ciszek, 2026; Waymer & Dyson, 2011). This led me to return to a concern I first named in my MA Capstone:

> **Strategic communication and public relations professionals must balance a dual responsibility to develop communications that fulfill organizational objectives with the need to honor and respect the individuals whose stories we share.** (Boone, 2020, p. 15, emphasis original)

I continued to work to better understand this "dual responsibility" after graduating, first as a communicator and then as a scholar. As I refined my focus, I came to view language as a site of power where decisions are always being made, even if they are not always fully examined. It

became clear that I needed frameworks beyond those currently available in public relations.

This led me to explore other forms of professional communication. In TPC, I found scholarship examining language as a technical practice and a site of power. In particular, I was drawn to its audience-centered approach and its attention to the micro-level decisions involved in composing texts, such as words and pictures (Boone, 2026).

Similarly, through coursework in sociolinguistics, I encountered frameworks that examine language as a social practice shaped by identity and power. These perspectives clarified questions in my own work, particularly around the cultural and ethical significance of language.

Finally, Critical Language Awareness provided a way to connect these insights, maintaining a focus on the communicator's agency and questioning of language. It offers a way to recognize the significance of these practices and to create space for reflection and action within professional environments. Together, the theoretical framework provided me with the foundation for my repositioning of communicators.

CHAPTER 5. Research questions

This study will examine the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent do the participating communicators demonstrate shared linguistic norms, expectations, and practices?

RQ2: How do the participating communicators conceptualize writing and language in public relations?

RQ3: How do the participating communicators negotiate ethical responsibility when writing?

CHAPTER 6. Method

In the previous chapter, I shared the research questions for this study. In this chapter, I will share the protocol I developed for interviewing professional communicators about their experiences with language and professional responsibility. It followed an adapted form of Wright's (2022) Metalinguistic Method of Sociolinguistic Interviews (MMSI) protocol, augmented based on Koeller's (2018, 2021) interviews with language workers. This study was reviewed and approved by the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board. All participants verbally provided informed consent prior to participation.

In total, I conducted 22 interviews (N=22) with communicators of varying specialties and experience levels. The discussions focused on understanding situations when participants encounter ethical concerns when writing, including their thoughts about the need to establish a singular organizational voice (Findlay, 2019). The interview protocol asked about their practices overall (see APPENDIX B for a summary), so it did not differentiate between communications for internal or external audiences.

Interviews are a common research method in public relations (Daymon & Holloway, 2011) and sociolinguistics (Haukås & Tishakov, 2024; Wright, 2022), but they have differing aims. In public relations, positivist researchers "*extract* information from respondents" (Daymon & Holloway, 2011, p. 220, emphasis original) while critical/interpretivist scholars "...collaboratively explor[e] the meanings, ideas, feelings and intentions" (p. 220) with the participant. In traditional linguistic interviews, meanwhile, researchers focus on "observing" (Labov, 1972, p. 97) the production of the particular linguistic variable under investigation as part of the interviewee's "natural speech" (p. 108)—without attention to what the individual says (Schilling, 2013; Wright, 2022). The MMSI, meanwhile, aligns with critical public relations in

appreciating the participants' unique insights about their beliefs and practices for language.

6.1. Interview recruitment

The interview participants were recruited through professional contacts and limited social media postings. I first contacted communicators I knew from my professional networks, including former coworkers and instructors. I also posted one message on my LinkedIn account about the project and encouraged interested communicators to contact me. Following the interviews, several of the participants assisted my recruitment by promoting the study to their own networks. This led to a mix of interview participants; some I knew and others I did not.

My recruitment messages stated that I wished to interview individuals working in public relations, strategic communication, or a related field. I chose to allow a wide range of specialties due to concerns that expressly limiting the interviews to public relations could bias responses toward individuals working in agencies or large corporations, spaces where specialization can occur.

My minimum qualifications required that participants have at least five years of experience, including at least one role with a substantial writing component. I accepted informal volunteer positions or internships as qualifying experience, as long as the individual had at least one year of professional experience. My main goal in this requirement was to ensure the individual had experience in creating content within a workplace, rather than an academic classroom.

Participants were required to be fluent in English, but the study was not limited to monolingual speakers (Truan, 2024). The participants were invited to share if they spoke other languages, but they were asked to focus their remarks on professional work done in English.

6.1.1. Self-selection bias

Some express concerns about samples that rely on self-selected volunteers (Hiratsuka, 2025). Most notably, research has shown that self-selected samples are more likely to contain individuals who have strong opinions about the research. This can, therefore, result in studies becoming non-representative and, therefore, non-generalizable. Researchers are, therefore, encouraged to provide incentives for participants such as gift cards or a copy of the interview transcript.

The goal of this research was not to generate a representative sample or a comprehensive understanding of how all communicators think about language. Instead, this study is dependent on having conversations with individuals who have developed a certain degree of metalinguistic awareness.

Decision. I established criteria that ensured individuals had experience creating communications within a workplace. I also offered $15 gift cards as compensation to all participants who completed an interview and the follow-up demographic survey.

6.2 Interview participants

In total, I conducted 22 interviews between August 25 and November 3, 2025. Twenty synchronous interviews occurred on Zoom, and two participants responded asynchronously to emailed questions due to scheduling constraints.

The participants came from a range of professional backgrounds and specialties (see Appendix A, Table A.1 for complete information). Twelve (54.5%) described themselves as working in-house, five (22.7%) in agencies, and five (22.7%) as independent consultants. Eleven (50.0%) participants labeled themselves as managers, three (13.6%) as technicians, seven (31.8%) as generalists responsible for both strategy and execution, and one (4.5%) as other. Six

of the managers (60%) reported that they spend more than half of their time on writing projects, including several who discussed being the lead writer for their client's content. Nine (40.9%) participants reported working in the nonprofit or governmental sector (including higher education), and 10 (45.5%) worked in the for-profit sector or were self-employed. The participants had between five and 40 years of experience, with an average of 17.7 years.

As encouraged in Waymer et al.'s (2023) Researcher Responsibility for Diversity and Inclusion, I collected demographic information to allow readers to consider the completeness of the sample. One person (4.5%) identified as Asian, four (18.8%) Black, two (9.1%) Indigenous, and 17 (77.3%) White.[10] For gender, the participants included 14 women (63.6%), seven men (31.8%), and one nonbinary person (4.6%).

Nearly all participants (21 of 22) reported only being fluent in English. One person stated they were also fluent in German, and one person reported using Spanish at work. Nine (40.9%) participants stated their highest degree was a bachelor's degree, 12 (54.6%) had a master's, and one (4.6%) had a doctorate. Eight (36.5%) stated their highest degree was in strategic communications or public relations, five (22.7%) in journalism, four (18.2%) in English, two (9.1%) in marketing, two (9.1%) in public policy, and one (4.6%) in paralegal studies. One person reported currently holding an Accreditation in Public Relations (APR), one was in the process of earning the accreditation, and one person had previously allowed their accreditation to lapse. Two participants reported previously working as journalists, and two had experience in advertising.

6.3. Interview setting

Twenty participants did Zoom interviews, and two participants responded to emailed

[10] Individuals had the option to select more than one race. See 6.4.5. Demographics questionnaire for more information about the data collection process.

questions.

6.3.1. Logistics

In considering the feeling I wished to create, I was strongly committed to following the spirit of Critical Language Awareness at every step of the interview process (Shapiro, 2021). I sought to maximize participants' agency by letting them dictate how their interview would be held, although I preferred Zoom due to logistical concerns. I also explored allowing chat interviews, but I abandoned them due to security concerns (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). I performed one pilot interview before the study.

The synchronous interviews were lively conversations lasting between 27 minutes and one hour and twelve minutes (average was 51 minutes). They were video recorded with the participant's consent and initially transcribed using Zoom's transcription features. I also recorded an audio backup on my phone. I did minimal notetaking during the interview to ensure a conversational flow (Liu, 2018), so the recordings were the primary data source. I saved the recordings on my password-protected computer, and I then uploaded them to the university's secure Microsoft OneDrive platform. I deleted the video and audio recordings once coding was complete, leaving the transcripts as the long-term reference.

For the email interviews, I followed Brondani and Mariño's (2019) nine-step protocol to (1) Prepare the interview, (2) Select the participants, (3) Contact participants before sending interview, (4) Pilot the interview questions, (5) Interview the participant, (6) Thank the participant, (7) Save interview material outside of your email, (8) Editing and analysis, and (9) Make yourself available to participants. I sent the questions through the university's secure email. I deleted the messages once I saved the responses in a Word document that was saved on the university's secure Microsoft OneDrive platform.

All participants who completed an interview and the follow-up demographic survey were given a $15 gift card as compensation for their time (Hiratsuka, 2025), unless they declined.

6.3.2. Mixing of interview modes

There are considerable methodological concerns about mixing interview modes (Brondani & Mariño, 2019; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021). For example, mixing synchronous video and in-person interviews means the researcher has differing amounts of information about the participant, particularly non-verbal cues such as body language. This is exacerbated when allowing synchronous and asynchronous interviews, as they can have significantly different dynamics (Dahlin, 2021).

Critical researchers are increasingly taking steps to limit the researcher-participant hierarchy by prioritizing a participant's comfort and agency (Dillman et al., 2014; Hope, 2016). Allowing an email option has also been shown to improve inclusion for neurodivergent individuals due to the focus on participant well-being and allowing additional processing time (Craddock, 2026).

Videoconference interviews. Conducting interviews over Zoom or other virtual/video conference platforms can create unexpected challenges for researchers, including technological problems and uncertainty about where the individuals will be located (Oliffe et al., 2021). It also provides several benefits that proved advantageous for this project, including built-in recording/transcription capabilities and the freedom for both the participant and interviewer to do the interview from locations where they felt comfortable. It also removed the need to travel to the participant (Khan & MacEachen, 2022), saving money and allowing for greater scheduling flexibility.

One of the primary concerns for conducting interviews through videoconferencing is the

possibility of technological problems. This was an issue for one interview where the video repeatedly froze. The participant and I resolved the problem by restarting our Zoom session and leaving our cameras off (making the conversation akin to a phone call).

Email interviews. For the email interviews, I prepared a modified interview guide that included my most important questions (see APPENDIX D to see the email guide). I followed Brondani and Mariño's (2019) email protocol in limiting the guide to six questions that I sent at one time. As the research indicated, I found these interview exchanges to be far more limited than the synchronous interviews, so I looked at them largely as confirmation of existing patterns.

6.4. Interview protocol

The focus of the MMSI is to understand the participants' metalinguistic awareness, defined as "the aspect of acquired (or learned) linguistic knowledge which encompasses social factors related to language use, knowledge, distribution, meaning, or occurrence variance" (Wright, 2022, p. 58). This is not a matter of paying attention to the effectiveness and efficiency of language. Instead, the MMSI "elicit[s] metacommentary stemming from… [the participant's] positionality-based awareness" and "elevat[ing] metalinguistic knowledge to a level comparable to that of a speech feature" (Wright, 2022, p. xix). It focuses on asking participants to reflect on how they think about language, such as what practices they consider the most correct. It, in turn, also allows the researcher to understand how communicators make decisions about language.

Wright (2022) created the MMSI for her linguistics dissertation examining the "social factors motivating Black professionals to style shift away from their racialized varieties in professional spaces" (p. 30). As originally conceived, the MMSI contained six sections: Introduction, Demographics, Language varieties, Discussion of targeted terms task, Usage assessment task, and Final interview questions. Wright stressed the importance of allowing the

interviews to be conversations between individuals with a shared identity, and she helped this by engaging in self-disclosures with the participants about her experiences as a Black woman navigating the workforce. Wright also expressly stated her intention to create a protocol that could be modified by other scholars based on their needs ("it is hoped that the more general design of the MMSI will be used by other researchers who would apply this method with similar goals in mind, but tailoring the specific questions to their study's broad themes, topic, or population" [Wright, 2022, p. 42]).

Decision. I elected to use a modified form of the MMSI due to its explicit focus on the ideas that shape how language is used, rather than specifically examining examples of practice. I judged this as helpful in examining the "unanswered questions" (Edwards, 2018, p. 46) that exist regarding the ways communicators use language, including what practices are "instinctive rather than conscious."

Selecting the MMSI as my protocol was a natural decision. First, the MMSI is uniquely constructed to elicit participants' metalinguistic awareness. The protocol values the participants as "individuals who have rich and varied experiences that are worth capturing" (Wright, 2022, pp. 42–43, emphasis removed). Secondly, I felt the MMSI provided an appropriate balance between structure and flexibility. Importantly, I was concerned that using a more formal or technical protocol would draw too much attention to the interview itself. This would then result in the participants answering the questions based on what they perceived to be the appropriate or correct answer—rather than the reality of their language practices. Third, I appreciated that Wright stated a goal of interrupting the "phonocentrism" (p. 36) common within sociolinguistic research, a mindset where spoken language is viewed as "the most or only valid languaging" (Henner & Robinson, 2023, p. 12; see Lillis, 2013). While both Wright and I examined thoughts

that were primarily expressed through speech, this study can only be legitimate when non-verbal forms of communication are valued as important. As such, the MMSI provided an important disruption in drawing attention to sociolinguistics as primarily focused on spoken speech.

Therefore, I adapted the MMSI based on my specific goals and Koller's (2018) interviews with language workers. These modifications were necessary due to the lack of existing research on language practices in public relations scholarship. Equally significant, Wright's (2022) interviews focused on topics that the participants were likely to have already considered. In my research, like in Cotter (2010b) and Vaicekauskienė's (2012) interviews with journalists, I found the participants had significant experience thinking about language and how they use it. However, as previous research highlighted (Weninger & Kan, 2013), participants repeatedly acknowledged that the interview was the first time they had been asked to critically examine their choices and/or underlying beliefs. This, therefore, required them to articulate practices and beliefs that had been taken for granted, and it created the possibility of realizations where the individual agrees with or departs from common practice.

My interview guide followed a semi-structured format, prioritizing the participant's directed "free talk" (Kristiansen, 2022, p. 8983). I developed questions for the range of topics I anticipated arising, ranging from language ideology to ethical concerns. I selected specific questions during the interview based on the participants' interests, and I modified my interview guide as the interviews progressed based on what was most successful.

Some question the research's validity when the same uniform questions are not used with all participants (Berry, 2002). I found this approach valuable; however, with the participants volunteering opinions and topics that I would not have otherwise considered.

6.4.1. Interview guide

The modified MMSI included six sections in the synchronous interview guide (see APPENDIX C for the synchronous interview guide): 1) Introduction, 2) Background, 3) Discussion of text production, 4) Discussion of language ideologies, 5) Identification of targeted terms task, and 6) Final questions/Debrief. In practice, I did not strictly follow the guide, but I included at least one question for each section during the interview.

Introduction. The interview began with an introduction where I introduced the project's goals and my background as a communicator. I answered any questions the participant had regarding the process or my intentions for the research. My introductory script highlighted my wish for the interviews to be a conversation, and I clarified that the focus was on understanding their thinking rather than testing their knowledge.

As an introductory question, I asked the participants if they had a preference for the pseudonym and/or general description used to identify them (allowing participants to select the level of detail used to name their role and industry). This proved helpful in both providing a moment for levity and reaffirming my commitment to anonymity.

Background. I started the interview with questions meant to put the participants at ease by discussing their experiences. This began with a discussion of their professional history with a focus on understanding the evolution of their experience in various roles and settings (agency vs. in-house, manager vs. technician, and for-profit vs. nonprofit/governmental). I finished this section by summarizing this information and asking for permission to publish the items included in Appendix A, Table A.1.

Discussion of text production. I next asked participants to think about how they selected language for statements. This began with a prompt asking participants to describe the thoughts

and considerations they have when beginning a new writing project. These questions also proved useful in drawing out examples of the ethical questions communicators experience when working, such as preparing sensitive communications.

Discussion of language ideologies. The conversation then advanced to questions discussing the communicator's expectations for language, including their experiences with establishing or following personal or institutional rules about style. These questions focused both on their overall expectations and the specifics of the selected language.

Identification of targeted terms task. Participants were asked to define and/or discuss the significance of a set of terminology, such as "organizational voice" and "being on message." I initially gathered these terms based on items seen in the literature, and I added further terms as the interviews progressed, like "authenticity" and "transparency." I reminded participants that I was not expecting them to have a perfect definition, instead wanting to know if/how they viewed the term as significant.

Final questions/Debrief. I finished by asking the individual if they had any questions or other thoughts to share. In a particularly illuminating question, I concluded by asking participants if there were other topics they expected me to ask, given my stated interest in "language and professional responsibility." This surfaced several items not previously considered, including the ethical significance of digital accessibility (Feingold et al., 2026) and translation (Drugan, 2017).

6.4.2. Insider research and personal disclosures

Rather than striving for the viewpoint of a neutral outsider, this research qualifies as insider research due to my shared identity with my participants (Greene, 2014). One question facing all researchers is whether to engage in personal disclosures by sharing their own

experiences during the interviews. There are mixed opinions about the appropriateness of this . Advocates argue that these disclosures help participants feel more comfortable (Cotterill, 1992). Critics express concerns that a researcher's self-disclosures can give participants a false sense of familiarity (Finch, 1984) or result in the researcher influencing the results (Greene, 2014).

Decision. In this research, the question of being open with my participants about our shared identities was answered when I started my recruitment from professional contacts. Additionally, I strongly felt the project would benefit from my self-disclosures, as it allowed the interviews to be a conversation among peers, reducing the "complex face needs" (p. 10) Koeller (2018) experienced as a linguist interviewing language workers. I expressly attempted to mitigate concerns about desirability bias (Preston, 2019) by emphasizing that my research came from questions I asked myself while working—acknowledging that I had not found answers.

6.4.3. Providing questions in advance

Another question I needed to resolve was whether to provide the interview questions to participants in advance. Traditionally, interview methodology has discouraged researchers from doing this due to the belief that the most legitimate and honest answers would come from in-the-moment reactions (Maurer, 2024). Critical scholars have increasingly resisted this, however, again arguing that sharing interview questions reduces the interviewer-participant hierarchy (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2005). For example, Haukås and Tishakov (2024) convincingly argued that sharing the interview questions with the English instructors proved helpful as participants could notice practices while teaching, resulting in richer interviews than if they relied on recollections gathered after the fact.

For this study, I also had the complexity that I did not intend to address all of the items in the interview guide. As discussed, I created an interview guide to cover the range of topics I

foresaw. This also meant the guide was long, creating the possibility of overwhelming or confusing the participants who elected to prepare.

Decision. I resolved these concerns by creating a summary of the interview guide that I included as the first page of the document (see APPENDIX B). It included an explanation of my plan to follow the conversational flow rather than asking each question, and it included a summary of the possible topics.

Sending questions in advance proved positive. Several participants appreciated the opportunity to read the questions ahead of time, including one participant who noted they needed to prepare due to mental health-related concerns. Conversely, other participants stated they did not review the questions ahead of time to allow for a natural conversation, but no one objected to receiving the questions. I did not have situations where I felt the participants had over-researched or preconstructed their answers to provide desirable responses, a commonly discussed concern for sharing interview questions in advance (Haukås & Tishakov, 2024).

6.4.4. Member checking

Another question researchers must decide is whether they will allow the participant to review their transcript and/or otherwise be involved in the analysis. While widely embraced as an opportunity to improve the validity of the data (Daymon & Holloway, 2011), allowing member checking can introduce complications if a participant realizes they do not like something they said or the way they stated it (Carlson, 2014). Additionally, researchers who prepare verbatim transcripts encounter confusion or concern, as few people are accustomed to reading spontaneous conversations. This can put the researcher in a difficult position, as the traditional expectations of research would preclude researchers from making changes requested by the individual. Researchers have also observed that participants who review their transcripts

may gain a false sense of ownership or certainty of how they will be presented. This is of particular concern if the participants believe their full comments will be shared, rather than the researcher summarizing or incorporating them into reports of broader trends.

Decision. For this project, I shared the interview transcript with interested participants and allowed them to request changes. I made this decision since I felt it was important to allow participants' ownership of their answers. I also wanted to allow them to consider whether they had inadvertently shared confidential or identifiable client information in a way I had not anonymized (for example, stating trademarked or signature phrases that could be identified through a simple internet search).

I initially planned to automatically send the transcripts to all the participants, but I decided to ask participants if they wished to review the content. I made this decision after reading the discussion in Birt et al. (2016) of the possible harm that can occur when participants are asked to revisit conversations containing difficult topics. While neither I nor the IRB anticipated that there would be a danger of harm from the interviews, this served as another reminder of the power dynamics that exist within research and, in particular, concerns about researchers making decisions for participants.

I concluded the interview by asking each person if they wanted to review the transcript. In an unanticipated benefit for the participants and a statement of the value of the research project and process, several of the participants expressed their appreciation for the transcript as they thought the conversation generated ideas they could use in the future for blogs, social media posts, or further thought leadership.

6.4.5. Demographics questionnaire

In their "Researcher Responsibility to Diversity and Inclusion," Waymer et al. (2023)

observed that public relations research over-relies on data from women, White participants, and college students. They reported many studies in public relations do not provide demographic data for participants, preventing editors and readers from considering this when determining the value of the research. They proposed six principles for a "Researcher Responsibility to Diversity and Inclusion," including direction for researchers to report complete demographic data.

Decision. As discussed in CHAPTER 5, I asked participants to complete a demographic questionnaire after the interview (see APPENDIX E for the complete survey). I decided to send this after the interviews to allow maximum time for the conversation and to allow participants the maximum control over what they wished to answer. The largest concern with switching to a post-interview survey was that a participant might miss the follow-up email. I addressed this by informing the participants about the survey during the conclusion of the interview and sending one reminder email to those who did not initially respond.

The questionnaire included identity-related demographics (like race and gender presentation) drawn from Hughes et al. (2022), along with professional demographics, such as whether the participant works in an agency, in-house, or as a consultant. None of the questions were required to complete the survey beyond providing an email to track completeness, and all the questions included the option to decline to answer.

All 22 participants completed the survey. I collected this information in aggregate, so I will only discuss the specifics of a participant's identity (such as race, employment, etc.) if the individual explicitly named it during the interview.

6.5. Recording and transcription

I saved the transcripts automatically created by Zoom during the interview. When I re-listened to the interviews, I found that many only needed copyediting. I also paused the audio

whenever a specific name or identifying detail was shared so I could substitute a generic label (for example, replacing a supervisor's name with "the communications director of the organization"). Once complete, I emailed the transcripts to interested participants for review. Only two participants requested changes, both regarding identifying information.

6.6. Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, I used an inductive process to identify common themes. I initially explored developing a coding scheme based on existing research, such as Metz's (2019) interviews with English language teachers or Rodgers's (2017) typology of discourse-based approaches to language attitudes. I abandoned this plan, however, after determining I was more successful in asking questions about broader ethical concerns, instead of specific linguistic choices or language ideologies.

I shifted to an inductive, reflexive thematic analysis, allowing themes to develop through immersion in the data. I elected to follow the six-phase thematic analysis framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006) and further explained by Ahmed et al. (2025): (1) familiarizing myself with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. I engaged in these stages iteratively, updating the codes as I found new patterns.

To begin, I printed the interview transcripts and read through them while re-listening to the audio recordings, highlighting key passages and recording initial reactions. I created a list of the commonly discussed topics to serve as initial codes and conducted a second pass through the interviews, pausing to color-code the notes and anonymize the comments. I then shifted to a spreadsheet with columns corresponding to these initial codes, grouping excerpts across interviews. I made several passes, refining themes based on their recurrence and significance.

Through this immersive process, the core themes presented in the following chapter emerged through repeated close reading/listening (Koller, 2018). Consistent with Wright's (2022) Metalinguistic Method of Sociolinguistic Interview (MMSI), I sought to keep participants' voices central to the analysis. I found Rockmann and Vough's webinar (Organizational Research Methods, 2025) and the related article (Rockmann & Vough, 2024) persuasive in recommending that "quotes… make up much of the findings section, with the authors' voice interspersed" (p. 638). I therefore engaged in several iterative drafts of the findings, selecting the quotes I felt best illustrated each theme. This included several power quotes—"those [quotes] where the informant is so poetic, concise, or insightful, that the author could not do a better job of making the same point" (Pratt, 2008, p. 501)—along with workhorse, tantalizing, and partial quotes that provided further support (Rockmann & Vough, 2024).

6.7. Researcher reflection

Going into my interviews, I felt uncertain about whether I would find participants interested in the types of conversation I hoped to have. I knew I had repeatedly asked myself questions about the language I used in my own work, but did other communicators? And, if they did, did they expect simple answers, or were they open to more nuanced or complex discussions?

In the end, I was pleased to find this concern unnecessary. Participants were highly receptive, with many asking for my perspective based on my research and experience. I addressed concerns about the possibility of me directing the conversations by staying close to the interview guide at the start and only deviating or offering my own views after participants.

Over time, it became clear that I was not introducing something entirely new but, rather, putting words to work that the participants already recognized as being their job. It had merely been left unexamined in public relations scholarship.

CHAPTER 7. Findings

In the previous chapter, I shared the metalinguistic interview protocol I used to interview the participants. The conversations proved illuminating, with the participants (see Appendix A, Table A.1 for information about the participants) demonstrating a deep appreciation for the power of language and their specific choices. Four themes emerged from the conversations: (1) The participants presented as members of a community with a shared understanding of the practices and expectations for language work; (2) The participants possessed metalinguistic awareness and a focus on audience understanding; (3) The participants felt a deep ethical responsibility but lacked formal frameworks to identify and resolve concerns; and (4) The participants discussed opportunities for agency, change, and resistance.

7.1. Theme 1: Communicators as a professional community

The first theme concerned a shared awareness of industry pressures and customs.

7.1.1. Subtheme 1: Collaborative relationships within the community

Many participants used language signaling a feeling of community with other practitioners that transcended organizational/sector boundaries. Many referred to their professional peers as "communicators," such as Penelope: "I definitely think… communicators are creative, and… find ways to get a message across in their own unique ways." Others used the plural first-person pronoun ("we") when discussing themselves as part of the larger group, such as Casey, who spoke about writing updates on LinkedIn "...of things that I believe… we [communicators] need to be paying attention to."

For some, these connections were formal work relationships. Julie called communication "a team science, where it's best if you have a group of people… [as] people come with different strengths and skill sets and things." She noted having a past relationship with another

communicator who was stronger at the "fine details" of editing, while she helped them with planning and big-picture thinking. Similarly, Paul discussed consulting with other university communicators when he has questions about language and identity.

For others, this connection was a shared awareness. Martha explained a feeling that "…as communicators, [we] are typically more in tune with… things," while Penelope noted a frustration that communicators "are not usually the last person who gets to pick the message… even though we know… what message might land better."

There was also evidence of community separations. Elizabeth questioned whether a corporate or for-profit communicator would pay the same level of attention to inclusive language concerns as she does as the communications director for a nonprofit-facing foundation. Casey also spoke about the traditionally strong delineation between external and internal communications departments, with external communications departments often having larger budgets and being seen as a more likely path to becoming senior leadership. Furthermore, the two participants who focused primarily on digital communication (Mark and Randall), spoke of their work as being separate from jobs focused on long-form communications. There was still a feeling of community united against these differences, however, with the assumption that they shared similar experiences.

7.1.2. Subtheme 2: Writing as a professional skill and identity

Many of the participants viewed their skill and expertise with writing as a point of professional and personal pride and identity. All the participants discussed writing and using language in a professional capacity to varying degrees, and 59.1% (n=13) stated they spend at least half their time doing writing projects.

Participants described taking different roles in the development of communications.

Many discussed being the first to draft a message either alone or collaboratively with other staff people, which would then be shared for review and approval. Lower-level communicators, meanwhile, often discussed being given language that had already been finalized, with their responsibility being to adapt the message to different audiences or channels, such as various forms of social media. This often required shortening messages or emphasizing particular points, while still staying true to the approved language.

For many, this work is an extension of a lifelong love of writing and/or language that started in childhood. Martha shared that she asked her parents for her first copy of the *Associated Press Stylebook* as a present when she was 12 years old. Similarly, Richard first identified his love of "ghostwriting"[11] while he was in high school, when he was asked to write messages on the notice board of the grocery store where his mother was the manager.

Many had completed specialized education, such as undergraduate or graduate degrees in public relations or strategic communications. Another common path was for communicators to first work as journalists. Calliope labeled her transition from journalism to public relations as being "freeing," as it allowed her to pair her expertise in concise writing with persuasive language and storytelling techniques that "really grab somebody and hold their attention."

Many participants took pride in their technical skills. Anne, for example, spoke about the challenges of mastering multiple style guides, as she worked at an organization that customized communications based on the final medium (AP style for electronic communications and *Chicago Manual* for print). Mark similarly provided an example of technical decisions made when modifying messages for social media: "A common challenge could be how AP Style will

[11] While generally associated with celebrities and politicians, the term "ghostwriting" has been used to describe any form of writing where the writer is not credited (Gallagher, 2024). Speechwriting and other forms of elite ghostwriting often take considerable time and skill as the writer will learn to replicate the individual's voice, including their preferred phrasing or favorite words (see Mapes, 2025 for an in-depth discussion of this process).

tell you to write out numbers below ten [as words]. But on social media, it's more likely that people will understand the digit three [3] than [the words] 'ten' or 'nine.'" Randall, similarly, reported that it is necessary to modify messages when posting on social media so they can meet length restrictions and community norms.

Importantly, many of the communicators emphasized that their skills did not end with the technical. Instead, many argued that they provide unique insights due to their big-picture view and intense focus on audience understanding. Richard, for example, discussed his progression from being a technician paid to "churn out" materials to progressing into a management role:

> On any given issue, I need to make sure the business[,]… my boss[,]… and the CEO [are] happy with what I'm writing. [The CEO] wants it to be shorter; everyone else wants it to be longer. I want it to be more declarative; my boss wants it to be more flowery…. I have to be the aggregator of all those [comments] and… make decisions based on what's most important to deliver the best end result… I'm paid for my judgment… [in answering] 'how can the words that I put on the page and the limited amount of time [we've been given] capture the attention and imagination of the audience in a way that persuades them to think or do something?'

Richard highlighted that communications is a role where non-experts weigh in on writing decisions. They provide advice that the communicator must then consider through their "judgment" to discern what will make the most effective communications. These decisions and insights, in turn, allow the communicators to carry influence within organizational conversations.

7.1.3. Subtheme 3: Shared linguistic norms and practices

Turning to their knowledge of the specific ways they use language, the participants described a consistent set of expectations for writing, language use, and messaging. They

emphasized technical precision, favoring "clear and concise sentences" (Anne, Ben, Lexi, Tom) and the elimination of extraneous words, complex terms, or confusing jargon. The participants also similarly described the values underlying communications, using terms like "authentic," "transparent," and "consistent." They also referenced a standard set of genres and tools, such as "press releases," "social media," "content calendars," "communication plans," "the Flesch-Kincaid readability formula," and "plain language standards."

Many spoke about formalizing these norms within their organization through the designation of an "organizational voice," the overall approach and mood expected in an organization's communications. These standards commonly addressed questions of language, personality, and tone, such as whether an organization would use direct language to convey authority or a more conversational tone to seem approachable. Sophia explained that the organizational voice can be a valuable "relationship-building tool," creating a feeling of familiarity between organizations and their audiences.

There were varying opinions on how broadly the organizational voice needs to be used across organizations. Elizabeth uniquely stated that all new staff members at her foundation are required to meet with a communications staff person to learn about the organization's style, with the communications staff then receive extended coaching. Lexi, meanwhile, argued that strict adherence is only expected in formal communications, allowing less training for staff who are internally focused.

Several participants emphasized that this designated voice needs to align with the overall approach and personality of the organization's most visible leaders. They also discussed the importance of allowing flexibility in how the voice is regulated. Those expecting strict adherence may provide formalized language to staff people that they expect to be used verbatim in all

instances. Others focused on providing a general summary of recommended language that individuals can then customize to their style and needs. Richard discussed his current efforts to unify messaging across a large multinational corporation with many subsidiaries and business units:

> We're in [more than 50] countries. We have [a dozen] executive team members who all have their own personalities and backgrounds and ways of speaking. And… there's a uniqueness to the way that they can tell the story with different audiences that connect in meaningful ways, while still having that core set of values and talking points, but they put their own spin on it, their own personality.

Richard demonstrated an appreciation for the unique ways leaders form connections with their audience, something he wishes to empower. Casey also noted the dangers of overstandardization:

> [Organizations need to consider] regional nuance if you're a global organization. You need to be speaking to your region with the nuances that come along with that culture.… I think there's also a consideration of voice when you're talking about departments. If you're in a warehouse or there's manufacturing, these are subcultures, and the language needs to reflect that.

Rather than being a monolith, organizations can be thought of as a combination of subcultures, each with its own language practices. Strict attempts at standardization would cause communications to become formulaic and identical, ignoring or eliminating an audience's unique needs or style. Instead, the participants stressed that diversity within organizations is something to be supported and celebrated.

The organizational voice is intended to unify organizations through shared values and

goals, rather than being an authoritative tool or enforcement mechanism. As Silvia explained:

> The people in your organization need to… have the same hymnal in front of them. They might sing the song a little differently; some are altos, some are sopranos, some are basses…. That's the little bit of flavor everyone can throw on it, but it's still the same hymnal book and set of songs.

Just as a hymnal enables multiple people to sing a shared song, the organizational voice creates a shared purpose and message for writers to center their communications. Several participants stressed that their goal is not to "stifle" (Sophia) individuals. It is, instead, intended to allow writers to "flourish within some parameters," (Jill) increasing their effectiveness and avoiding disjointed communications.

To aid these efforts, many participants discussed developing and using customized organizational style guides where decisions were documented about word selection, grammar, and tone. Lexi discussed asking organization leadership to clarify how the organization's name should be written:

> [Creating a style guide] was one of the first things I did when I started… I worked at a company with a super confusing name and product name. And so, I would ask our upper C-suite, 'When is [our name written as] one word and when is it two words? Describe it to me in a sentence.' …[Because] if our staff couldn't use our name correctly, how do we expect our clients to?'

Here, Lexi provided the specific example of standardizing how to write the organization's name, arguing that it is part of projecting a professional image. The style guides were created to ensure this consistency.

Many participants also discussed using the creation of an organizational style guide as an

opportunity for broader conversations about the organization's priorities and values for recognizing differences. Anne suggested conversations about the style guide are opportunities for communicators to explain their reasoning for adopting specific decisions, avoiding concerns later that other employees will see edits as arbitrary. This is particularly needed since nearly all the participants reported using the *Associated Press Stylebook* as the foundation for their organization's style guide, despite this style not commonly being taught outside of journalism and related fields.

Taken together, these shared linguistic practices and professional socialization demonstrated that communicators have a shared knowledge and community. These norms shape how communicators view their role, words, and audiences, leading to the formalization and continuation of existing practices.

7.2. Theme 2: Metalinguistic awareness and audience orientation

All the participants demonstrated a deep appreciation for the significance of language choices, and they particularly focused on the ways audiences made sense of communications.

7.2.1. Subtheme 1: Language as a strategic social resource

All the participants spoke about language's power to uplift and inform. Sophia, for example, discussed why she became a communicator after doing public health education during graduate school:

> [I was] … figuring out how to talk about this very complicated topic [of addiction as a chronic illness]… to everything from high schoolers to second graders and legislators…. I saw that the way we talk about diseases... really matters. And I saw a lot of the wrong kind of communications, the wrong kind of messaging. And frankly, it pissed me off.

Sophia gained a firsthand understanding that positive communications can interrupt an

audience's stereotypes, while "the wrong kind" reinforces stigma. This knowledge led her to want to lead in determining how issues are communicated.

Accordingly, many argued that language choices cannot be happenstance, with many stressing the need to balance stories, facts, and emotions. Anne named the importance of being intentional when selecting words: "Language is wonderful. It can be beautiful and compelling and move people to action…. At the same time, it could be taken the wrong way and create hate and anger and fear. All over words and word choice." Silvia, similarly, discussed efforts to ensure complex information can be understood broadly:

> In my writing, I try to think about an everyday idea, concept, [or] process that humans understand that I can tie to. Something to really make it durable for people to understand it.… [For example,] if we're doing a new program at an employer, I might use the image of a tea bag [infusing] into the water, and you can't separate the color from the water anymore.

Silvia found that audiences connect with messages when the writer uses metaphors or examples that are familiar. This, in turn, ensures that the messages are both understood and remembered.

Many participants discussed paying particular attention to the "call to action" (CTA) written in each communication. These phrases direct the audience to perform an activity, such as reading an article or registering for an event. Many discussed pressures to make these calls "shorter, sweeter, and less words" (Silvia).

Mark and Randall both stated that ensuring there is a strong CTA becomes a primary concern when adapting long-form communications into social media copy. Sophia further argued that having a strong CTA became a hallmark of the organizational voice she used when working at an anti-racism center. She constructed messages to "start with emotional validation and end

with action," leaving readers with a feeling of agency rather than despair.

Most participants also heavily stressed the importance of brevity and concision. Some noted strategically using hedging words or conditional language (words like "may" or "could," rather than "must" or "will"). Fiona, for example, discussed the importance of this given the seriousness and politicization of health communications.

> I feel like that is one of the biggest parts of my job, the fear of perceiving something incorrectly or giving somebody incorrect medical information inadvertently…. So, I find myself, when I'm writing about [health research], using the word 'may' or 'could' quite a lot. It just is that additional buffer…

In this instance, Fiona reported that hedging language allowed her to simplify complex information without presenting too much certainty.

Stella also stated she advises clients that hedging and conditional language may be needed to ensure accuracy. She provided the example of a client wanting to make bold claims, such as the product/service being "the first ever" of its kind. While she understands the wish and intention, she argues they need to moderate the claim (for example, "[we believe it] to be the first ever")—a distinction she describes as "writing for truth" rather than "writing for impact." Taken together, the participants demonstrated how they intentionally and strategically use language while following industry practices.

7.2.2. Subtheme 2: Audience-centered reasoning

When discussing the importance of using consistent language and messaging, the participants largely justified standardization as an act of care for their audience, rather than a focus on conforming to prescriptive rules or image/face concerns. Molly provided an example of the confusion that could result if a website contained messages written by different people who

each wrote according to their personal preference:

> You don't want to be trying to find information about something on a website, and one page is written [in] 'you' form, and one page is written in an entirely different way…. Your brain kind of has to code-switch between those, and it's not helpful…. You're going to notice those weird jumps, and you're going to be like, 'Where do I find this thing?' And it just makes the user experience so much less trustworthy.

Molly noted that organizational websites are a unique form of communication, as users can easily navigate between content written by different departments and for differing audiences. Without standardization, users could be confused or distracted by unexplained changes in words or tone, undermining coherence and trust.

Anne further provided an example of the confusion that could be created due to inconsistent naming practices:

> I've worked at colleges, and we [the university communications staff] referred to the institution as 'the College'—always a capital [letter C]…. It's a style choice that we were deliberately making, [and] if you have inconsistencies… then it's unclear to your reader which college you're referring to. Are you referring to 'the college,' meaning the one that's writing, or are you talking about some generic other college?

Anne demonstrated concern that differences could confuse readers, even when they are minute. Adam further argued that audiences may overinterpret them:

> I think consistency is what leads to credibility, and that's where… [it is important to have] unity so that a press release doesn't sound all that different from an ad or a TV spot or a corporate video… I think when I see something that comes out of left field as a consumer, it leads me to believe [the organization may not be consistent] when the stakes

> are higher, whether there's a crisis situation or the brand is in the news for whatever reason…. They might respond differently than what they've been saying in their ads or doing…. I think that could be a red flag.

Adam expressed concern that audiences could view inconsistencies as signals of organizational misalignment or deceptive messaging. This could be particularly concerning when the audience is new to an issue or organization, leaving them to their own devices for interpreting inconsistencies.

Similarly, Stella discussed the danger of communicators "writing for ourselves" without attention to the audience's needs:

> It's very common for companies… to just want to talk about, 'This is our product. This is why it's great. Here's why you're going to love it…' Some of that is fine [as audiences] need to know what your product is and why it's special, but really, [customers want you to] start with my problem and how you're going to solve [it.]

Stell emphasized that writing is more effective when it is written with a focus on the audience's needs and situation. This can be lost, however, if the communicator assumes their audiences have the same information, worldview, or vocabulary as they do.

This focus on audience care is particularly needed when communicating difficult news. Jill discussed drafting communications about layoffs:

> I think that you have to approach [layoff communications] with empathy… and you have to approach it from Maslow's hierarchy of needs. That has really been an anchor… There's a need to know, and there's a want to know…. [If I tell you] so much that I'm giving you a flurry of details, you could miss what is most relevant. I am clouding your ability to understand and comprehend what is most important to you….

Communicators must sometimes prepare messages that will be difficult for audiences, a responsibility that requires intentionality, compassion, and empathy. Communicators must determine what information to present so they can be clear without leaving the reader confused or with unanswered questions.

These examples, as was done consistently throughout the interviews, demonstrated communicators referencing their audience's capacity and needs as the guiding point for decisions about what and how to communicate.

7.3. Theme 3: Ethical responsibility but a lack of existing frameworks

When it came to discussing a communicator's ethical concerns, many of the participants eloquently expressed a deeply felt sense of responsibility. This exists since they are "the caretaker of [an organization's] reputation that is built on words" (Calliope), along with an awareness that their communication may introduce their audience to new ideas or people. As Randall explained, "In terms of that framing, it's… really important to do it properly and to know the power that you have…. It's… on you to understand the impact that you're having with the words that you write." There was mixed discussion, however, of how this duty is achieved in practice.

7.3.1. Subtheme 1: Ethical responsibility to organizations, audiences, and society

Most participants described a feeling of ethical responsibility to proactively anticipate audience reaction, rather than seeing themselves as only being responsible for compliance or responding to a crisis. This included anticipating an audience's possible (mis)understandings. They described this responsibility as being pointed inwards (to their organization) and outwards (to their audience and society). As Silvia explained:

I take a lot of accountability and care in what I write and how it might impact a person or

> a community on the other end of that—whether that's for internal communications I'm doing for a company's employees or external communications for their consumers, their partners, their suppliers, [or anyone that is] reading and consuming or hearing these messages… I think every communicator should have that in mind.

Conversations about professional responsibility often centered on a communicator's sense of "accountability" to their organization. Some describe this responsibility as also applying to obvious audiences, like customers, but Silvia reminded me that there is also a responsibility to broader society.

Calliope further argued that communicators must consider how a message accounts for the organization's deeper values, actions, and history:

> You cannot be an effective public relations counselor, writer, or leader without the due diligence of making sure whatever you develop does not cause trouble down the line after delivery…. [You must] bulletproof the language you're using…. So, you're thinking ahead to things like inclusiveness. You're thinking ahead to regulatory and legal compliance. You're… digging up the skeletons in their reputational closet and saying, 'Hey, if you're going to talk about this, you'd better have a way to answer for this, because it is in your history.'

Like others, Calliope argued that communicators hold a responsibility to "bulletproof the language" that extends beyond simply writing words to fulfill organizational objectives. Elizabeth similarly shared a story of an experience that "cemented" this responsibility for her, stemming from a misunderstanding when she shared a teenager's story in an annual report:

> I was telling a story about a young man who worked in the kitchen, and he went to culinary school…. And there was a photo… of him in his official gear, and [it was paired

> with a simple caption like]… 'Here's so-and-so with his chef's hat. Ready to cook.' I didn't even think about that [written caption] because he had approved the story…. So, it was published, he saw it… and was really upset that I called the hat... a chef's hat [rather than its formal name, 'a toque'], because it wasn't what he had worked so hard to achieve.…

Elizabeth demonstrated that individuals may have specific preferences about how they want to be portrayed in communications. These are preferences built from their experience and understanding of the world, so they can be deeply personal and significant. It can therefore be easy for communicators to make inappropriate assumptions unless they take time to understand the individual.

Similarly, Casey argued communicators must actively question the "say-do gap" in communication:

> I think you have to be in integrity with what you say and what you do… [I]f you put something out there, you have to follow through with it, and there has to be some sort of accountability to it, because you're role modeling. You're letting the organization know what's okay to say, [and] what's not okay to say. What does respectful look like? What does follow-through and accountability look like?

Many organizations have experienced challenges due to the perception that they make promises that sound good but are then left unaddressed. Casey argued that communicators have an important responsibility to question whether their organization is making promises or claiming values that are left unfulfilled by action.

The participants also argued that their responsibilities include maintaining an awareness of their organization's many overlapping audiences, including the possibility that a message

could be transmitted beyond its intended target. Multiple participants mentioned the concern that messages for written employees and internal audiences can easily become public in today's interconnected society, despite the historical distinction between external and internal communications. Several participants also noted their growing concern about staying aware of how critics or bad actors could intentionally attack or misrepresent an organization's language. This presented an ethical awareness that extends past simply picking the correct words, requiring them to consider moral ambiguities and engage in critical reasoning.

7.3.2. Subtheme 2: Relying on doubts and informal reasoning

When asked how they identify ethical problems, however, many pointed to using informal and intuitive methods, such as paying attention to their personal reactions. Adam reported considering whether he "likes" a communication, judging himself as "pretty reasonable." Elizabeth similarly noted responding to her physical reactions:

> When I'm writing something, if it feels weird, it feels weird in my body. It's not even like I'm thinking about it. If I read something somebody else wrote, or something jumps out at me, it's often a visceral gut kind of feeling…. And even if I can't, in my brain, say… 'this is bringing something up for me' [or] 'this might not be the phrase we want to use…' [I'll tell the writer] 'something about this feels a little icky, so can we rework this?'

Elizabeth highlighted that some communicators experience "a visceral gut kind of feeling" of ethical concern, rather than a conscious awareness.

This demonstrated a pattern repeatedly seen throughout the interviews when participants were asked to provide specific examples of moments of ethical uncertainty. Many were quick to name times they felt concerned, but they were less certain in being able to name the specific

problem. This would, in turn, make it difficult for the individuals to provide concrete feedback, offer solutions, or preempt problematic actions.

In one specific challenge, several participants noted concerns that necessary nuance and context could be lost in the pressure to shrink content into short, easily digestible messages. Sophia explained that truth can require complexity, referencing an episode of the online series, *The Alt Right Playbook* (Innuendo Studios, 2023). In the episode, a teenager's complex explanation of evolution is met with a simple but misleading response: "You can't get snakes from chicken eggs." For Sophia, the episode highlighted the tension between accuracy and brevity faced by ethical communicators:

> The whole point of this video is to explain that you can make a lie as simple as you want. Lies can be infinitely simple. 'Evolution can't be real because you can't make snakes out of chicken eggs.' 'Climate change is fake because it's just a hoax… [created by] scientists trying to make money.' … You can make a lie… infinitely snappy, and you can just crucible it down to just an emotional pop. But truth can only get so simple before it's not accurate anymore… especially when it comes to these nuanced, emotional, and scientifically complex things.

Sophia noted that ethical communication requires an appreciation for nuance, emotional sensitivities, and context. Therefore, while misinformation can intentionally be made ready to summarize, truth demands complexity. Given the industry's strong preference for "short and concise" messages, communicators may be challenged to justify this deviation from expected practice.

7.3.3. Subtheme 3: Defaulting to professional norms

Ultimately, despite their questions and concerns, many participants reported resolving

ethical concerns in ways that align with professional norms—particularly when other answers were not readily available. Procedurally, this was evident in the number of times the participants discussed deferring language concerns to their organization's legal departments. This was most seen for those working in corporate structures and regulated industries, such as Adam's work for a healthcare client, where he reported needing to soften messaging that the legal department deemed too aggressive. Jill similarly noted concerns about the need to consider language based on legal judgments of liability or breaching confidentiality. Penelope similarly reported resolving ethical concerns about a client's factual claim by asking if the legal department had reviewed it.

Similarly, regarding industry norms, the participants reported a near-uniform reliance on the *Associated Press Stylebook* (Froke et al., 2022) when there were language questions. Philosophically, Martha argued there can be value in deferring to the Associated Press's reasoned approach to language: "I have deep appreciation for Associated Press style and the continuity that comes with that, so that we… say things as effectively, as succinctly, [and] as clearly as possible."

Most participants provided a more practical reason for their decision to "live and die by the AP Stylebook" (Calliope): Reporters can more easily integrate an organization's materials into press coverage if the texts are written according to their style requirements. Tom said he explained the following about the significance of following Associated Press requirements:

> It's a guarantee that I'm going to have my article published on [my organization's] website because I run it. It's a guarantee that [our parent organization] is going to run my story because they need stories. However, it's the areas of communication that aren't guaranteed that I'm shooting for [like media coverage]. So, if I write an article that's not in AP format, a newspaper's less likely to pick it up, and it really just helps them in the

long run if it's AP style.

Communicators know that their stories will be shared by their organization, but it takes more work for information to be reported by journalists. This led many communicators to shift their writing patterns and organizational style requirements to match the needs of this specific audience.

7.4. Theme 4: Opportunities for action

At several key moments in the interviews, the participants paused to acknowledge the value of the interview conversation, recognizing it forced them to articulate previously unexamined work practices and beliefs. Additionally, throughout the interview, several participants shared examples of instances where they deviated from industry practice based on their professional judgement or personal beliefs. Many were small, but despite their limited significance, they are all moments to be recognized where participants resisted or questioned existing professional practices due to feelings of professional responsibility.

7.4.1. Subtheme 1: Appreciating identity and positionality

Many participants described ethical action as beginning with an awareness of their own identity and positionality, coupled with a responsibility to actively consider perspectives and experiences beyond their own. Participants framed the importance of positionality as an ongoing concern that shaped how they approached language decisions, including when to seek further research, consultation, or collaboration.

Julie and Elizabeth both stressed that communicators need to remember that their personal or organizational opinion only represents one perspective. Elizabeth, for example, discussed how recognizing her positionality meant holding multiple truths:

> [As a White woman], I could say… that racism isn't really that bad, and it doesn't affect me… That could be true for me…. Something else that is true for me is that, because I am a woman, I feel like I need to be very careful if I walk alone at night.… But I know male colleagues… could say that is not true for them.

Elizabeth demonstrated that she is aware that her experience is one of many through discussing her own experiences with marginalization. Fiona similarly provided practical advice for carefully considering the examples given in writing, such as mentioning alternatives to assuming all people can afford food delivery services.

Sophia provided the most detailed account of her awareness of the limitations of her positionality, something she had put considerable thought into as a White woman who managed communications for an anti-racism institute. She shared how she carried the weight of this responsibility, noting, "If I f--- this up, I am doing racism." She explained that she felt a responsibility both to her Black coworkers and the Black community her institute served.

> It is racist to publish something that my Black colleagues are not okay with…. It's also racist to make them do their job for you because 'I'm just a poor White lady, so do my work and fix everything….' And its stuff I have spent so much time thinking about and sometimes getting wrong and then… learning to be better.

This illustrates a tension that communicators must navigate in remaining aware of the limits of their knowledge and experience while still taking responsibility for the messages they produce. For Sophia, this meant utilizing her expertise in communications and public health while recognizing that she could not fully understand the lived experiences of the Black communities the institute served. Similarly, she described her relationship with subject matter experts in saying she would not publish a communication "unless I am certain, based on [their] explicit

words and also our relationship, that [they] are comfortable with this." This, therefore, indicated an intentional level of accountability, respect, and partnership that Sophia has taken on due to appreciating the limits of her positionality.

7.4.2. Subtheme 2: Oxford comma conventions

Throughout the interviews, there was one consistently voiced complaint expressed regarding style rules: an extreme frustration with the Associated Press's position on the Oxford comma (the final comma placed before the "and" in a list of three or more items; see Associated Press, 2022). Traditionally, the Associated Press stated that this comma should only be included when it is essential for comprehension.[12] This rule is heavily contested in writing circles, with opponents arguing that it creates additional possibilities for confusion and misunderstanding (Kessler, 2024). Many other style guides require the final comma, including the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

The Oxford comma emerged as an unexpected site of tension. It demonstrated the possible reactions when disagreeing with prescriptive rules that ranged from forced compliance to outright rejection.

Some participants voiced frustration but followed the direction, showing commitment to adherence to institutional rules. Another group of resistors emerged, however, as individuals who refused to drop the comma—allowing their style to become "AP with the Oxford comma stuck in" (Anne).

Fiona, the writer for a corporate healthcare blog, noted she follows her supervisor's

[12]An example where the Associated Press states an Oxford comma is not needed is a sentence with a simple list of the colors on the American flag (for example, "The American flag is red, white and blue.") Meanwhile, the AP still calls for the inclusion of the comma when giving a complex list (for example, "I went to the park with my parents, Sue and Greg.") Here, removing the comma could leave readers uncertain about whether the sentence is discussing four people or a set of parents named Sue and Greg.

direction in omitting the Oxford comma, despite finding it contrary to her overall charge of ensuring the readability of her blogs. Richard similarly noted that he consistently uses the Oxford comma when drafting talking points or informal communications, only removing it for the company's annual report or other formal communications where there is an absolute requirement to match the organization's style guide. Elizabeth, meanwhile, noted that her organization's decision to follow the AP guideline can be a contentious moment in the style guide training for new staff:

> I know when I've got an English major [in the training] because I hear [their objections]. And I just preface it, 'Personally, you can use whatever you want. Professionally, this is what we're asking you to do.'

Unlike journalism, employees who were trained in English programs or elsewhere were repeatedly told that the Oxford comma was a mandatory requirement for their writing. They, therefore, will become frustrated with the communications staff. This, in turn, leads them to view organizational style guides as a form of enforcement and compliance (Galasiński & Ziółkowska, 2022), as Elizabeth encountered when establishing her organization's expected practice. Julie reported similarly celebrating her new freedom as an independent contractor:

> I will admit… working at [a health and research institution] for 16 years, they're an AP shop, and I love me an Oxford comma. So, one thing that I am reveling in is that I can use it whenever I want…. it's fabulous.

Released from the style dictates of her previous employer, Julie is now able to use the Oxford comma in the ways she feels most appropriate. So, in all these instances, the dissenting participants judged their personal and professional judgment to be sufficient reason to deviate from the established rules—a decision that could extend beyond this simple punctuation mark.

7.4.3. Subtheme 3: Negotiating DEI language

Another example of action with stronger philosophical and political significance emerged around conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many reported having conversations with organizational leadership about whether DEI efforts could move forward following the reelection of President Trump, due to the heightened hostility and legal actions.

Some participants stated their leaders directed them to identify new language to limit unwanted attention from adversarial audiences. Calliope, for example, advised a client to change "diversity, equity, and inclusion" to "inclusion and accessibility," explaining, "If a word change allows us to keep focusing on the work, then let's change the words and not the work."

Sophia, meanwhile, reported her organization could not change its language as explicitly naming racism was central to the anti-racism institute's established organizational voice: "The [institute] couldn't… stop using 'racism'… and stay true to our values… without betraying our audience… We didn't gaslight. We didn't shy away. We named the problem in spite of, or because of, the pushback." She acknowledged, however, that other organizations might decide differently, particularly those in danger of losing funding:

> I have colleagues who are federally funded, and they had to be creative because the right words were literally no longer available to them [due to formal prohibitions].[13] But even if you can't say the right word, you can avoid the wrong words. And that should always be part of your job… being thoughtful, creative, and within the structure of how you work, always aiming for the best.

Communicators are pressured to eliminate language that is now being considered politically problematic or legally risky. Sophia highlighted that communicators do not need to think of

[13] See Yourish et al. (2025) for discussion of the words "discouraged" during President Trump's second term.

language concerns as a simple binary decision. Instead, they can seek out creative alternatives or refuse to adopt "the wrong words" if those terms are discriminatory or marginalizing.

> Paul also reported rethinking his approach to identifying communities and identities:
>
> I found… that now really feels like a moment to be more specific [in language]. I'm not using 'BIPOC' [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] as much as I would have in my previous roles, because… [l]umping all of people of color together… obscures the fact that some of these resources are needed in different communities more than other[s]. So, it's been an interesting process to be like, 'I'm not going to use this… shorthand thing. I'm going to be more specific, and, if I don't catch everyone involved in this specific paragraph, we're going to have to be okay with that.'

Paul and several other communicators discussed concerns that using "BIPOC" and similar terms was originally intended to be inclusive. There is now resistance, however, to the ways the broader terms "lump together" cultures, ethnicities, and communities—all of which have their own history, traditions, and concerns. In all these instances, communicators worked with leadership to strategically use language to negotiate political difficulty, demonstrating a range of options available for responding to pressure.

7.4.4. Subtheme 4: Adopting inclusive communications decisions

Similarly, many of the participants discussed intentional efforts to be responsible communicators by reconsidering how they approach issues, people, and communities. This included adopting inclusive language or trauma-informed communications standards, as discussed in *The Conscious Style Guide* (Yin, 2024, 2026) or other community-focused resources (see Durazzi, 2022).

For example, several participants discussed transforming traditionally deficit-based

narratives into stories of opportunity through the adoption of asset-based language. As Randall explained, “Asset framing… [is] framing in a way that doesn’t paint people in the light of what they don’t have.” Martha also stated that asset-based language places the focus on systemic failures, rather than simply blaming a person (for example, stating “a person experiencing homelessness” to name the lack of housing, rather than allowing “a homeless person” to focus on the individual’s perceived failure to keep a home). Elizabeth further explained the importance of asset-based language in describing her foundation’s efforts in awarding grants:

> We don’t want to frame the people doing work in the nonprofit sector as something that comes from a place of deficit, because they’re actually problem solvers; they’re solution builders. [It matters,] just the way that you change your language and reframe that to ‘communities are coming to us with solutions’ or ‘communities have a lot of knowledge.’

Many organizations use language that portrays them as heroes or the story's main actors. Here, Elizabeth demonstrated her organization’s efforts to break that dynamic by recognizing the knowledge a community brings to answering its challenges.

Similarly, Penelope discussed the common narratives used for Indigenous communities:

> The way that people are talked to can have a real impact on [them] viscerally. For instance, saying things like… ‘the struggles of Indigenous communities.’ So, that’s one frame…. The other frame would be ‘the resilience of Indigenous communities….’ Just thinking of how that one frame switch gives empowerment versus disembodiment.

Penelope, who is Indigenous, decided to specialize in trauma-informed communications and community consultation after seeing negative narratives repeated about their community.

> …Talking about trauma-informed messaging is saying, ‘Okay, yes, [Indigenous communities have been] put in a position… that’s really terrible, and there’s a lot of

> feelings attached there. How can we make that message feel like it's for the community and for empowerment? It's also by saying, 'Okay, what are all of the historical atrocities that have happened to the community that I'm working with? What [have] the people in that community said that they would prefer in terms of communication, words, use, or style?'.... [It's] just trying to take away the emotional brunt work [of] the messages….

Penelope argued it is the communicator's responsibility to recognize that "there's a lot of feelings attached" to language used to describe community, and, therefore, using trauma-informed language should be a necessity for responsible communications. Sophia also positioned this attention as a requirement of the job:

> Don't fall in love with your language norms. Always be listening, always be updating. … if you're a professional and you are representing a professional organization… part of your job is to keep up to date…. So, it's work, and it's tiring, and it's your job! … Because, I mean, language is fluid, and especially if we're in the age of TikTok. So, acceptable terms are shifting, being appropriated, and reclaimed all the time.

Sophia articulated a sentiment repeated throughout the interviews: Attention to language should not be considered extra work for professional communicators. Instead, they argued that this care about how to represent people and communities is a core responsibility.

Taken together, the findings in this chapter demonstrate that the interview participants had shared expectations about community, language, and professional responsibility. I will further discuss how their answers relate to the theoretical framework in the next section.

7.5 Researcher reflection

I thoroughly enjoyed the conversations. They surfaced issues I expected to be raised (for example, questions I frequently receive about how to adjust language around DEI) and others I

had not previously considered. One notable example of the latter was the recognition that there could be ethical significance in something as seemingly trivial as an Oxford comma.

I initially laughed when the first participant mentioned it, as I had always viewed the concern as a minor stylistic choice that creates unnecessary debate. Over time, and particularly when considered through the theoretical framework, I began to see this punctuation mark differently: It was an example of participants making intentional decisions to depart from prescriptivist expectations due to concerns about readability. In other words, these were exercising agency based on their professional judgment and concern for their audience.

Another theme that surprised me was the strength with which participants talked about standardization as a matter of audience care. I had assumed participants would emphasize face concerns (Koller, 2021) that inconsistent language would make communication appear sloppy or uncoordinated. This is how I believed I would have answered if I had been asked while working. Instead, as discussed in the findings, I was impressed that the participants framed their concerns in terms of audience experience, such as the risk that a website user might feel lost when navigating between pages written in different voices. This caused me to feel unsettled and raised an important question: Why did my reaction seem narrower?

With reflection, I came to recognize that this difference is likely rooted in my early professional experiences on political campaigns. These are spaces where controlling the message and image are seen as paramount. Recognizing this allowed me to appreciate more fully that my perspective reflects only one set of experiences within a broader range of professional contexts. It became another reminder that I needed to listen closely to ensure I was not projecting my own experience onto the participants.

CHAPTER 8. Discussion

In the previous chapter, I shared the findings generated from the metalinguistic interviews with professional communicators. In this chapter, I will summarize and interpret the findings through the theories discussed.

8.1. Summarizing the research findings

This dissertation drew insight from 22 semi-structured metalinguistic interviews conducted with professional communicators, examining their thoughts about language, writing, and professional responsibility (see Appendix A, Table A.1 for information about the participants).

8.1.1. Expectations for language as instrumental and strategic

The first research question sought to document participants' expectations for linguistic practices. The participants showed a strong shared understanding of the linguistic norms and expectations of their work. Their focus on language was instrumental and strategic, prioritizing most the communicator's goals and whether the language would effectively transport their audiences from a space of unknowing to action, understanding, or agreement. When speaking of execution, many participants prioritized brevity and described language in line with vulgar pragmatism (Pennycook, 1997; Slack et al., 1993).

Notably, the participants used audience-focused reasoning to explain language choices, including the need for an established organizational voice. These language conversations did not merely stop at determining matters of correctness according to prescriptive rules. Instead, participants discussed the need to understand what information an audience already possesses, what more they need, and how that information can be shared most effectively. At the same time, these decisions were often limited by existing linguistic, genre, and institutional

conventions. In particular, many communicators prioritized writing materials that journalists could easily repurpose for media coverage—a decision that directly shaped how and what information they included.

8.1.2. Writing as central to identity

The second research question asked how writing fit into the participants' understanding of their professional and personal identities. The participants described writing as an activity that is central to their work, rather than a simple task to be executed in service of broader objectives (Thurlow, 2017). They viewed writing as a specialized skill and aptitude (Duchêne, 2019; Portmann, 2025), key to defining their role and influence within organizations (Lillis, 2013). Many took pride in their attention to detail when writing and reading communications. Many resisted the view of communicators as mere technicians (Slack et al., 1993), with even the least involved in drafting communications making judgment calls about how to adapt messages to specific situations and audiences.

8.1.3. Felt responsibility but execution paralysis

The third research question asked how the participants negotiated ethical responsibility in their writing. The participants widely argued that they hold a moral responsibility as the individuals publishing an organization's words into the world (Tillery, 2001), including an awareness that they could be introducing readers to new ideas or communities. They recognize that language and authorship are not neutral concepts, with writers making subjective decisions about tone and content (Slack et al., 1993).

The participants recognized the possibility that skilled writers with bad intentions could intentionally use language to confuse or misdirect their audience, creating complexities to distract audiences or inaccurately smooth over uncertainty (Sims, 1993). The participants

recognized that this focus on deception summarizes the public's common understanding of public relations—that it is filled with professionals who will lie and spin narratives for the benefit of their employers and themselves (Cohen, 2008). Most argued that this describes a small minority of communicators, however, and they confidently set themselves outside the professionals engaging in problematic activities. Many acknowledged that ethical problems may arise for reasons other than a communicator's intentional act of trickery or misdirection, such as a communicator incorrectly assuming their audience has the same information, vocabulary, or worldview.

For many, uncertainty about how to address these concerns seemed to result in a partial form of ethical paralysis, with many expressing feelings of concern but a lack of clarity on how to identify problems or solutions. Therefore, when they could not easily identify answers, many settled for continuing existing industry practice, accepting them as necessary or generally accepted practice (Tillery, 2001). One point where this is especially pronounced was the near uniformity of the participants deferring to the *Associated Press Stylebook* for language concerns. This gave the participants the benefit of a single answer to questions that could otherwise be matters of preference. The answers, however, have been developed according to the Associated Press's priorities (Cotter, 2014), rather than an organization's unique circumstances and audience.

The participants demonstrated an awareness of their power, aligning with Slack et al.'s articulation theory, envisioning communicators as authors. Many spoke about the need for finding balance in communications, with dangers existing that audiences could be confused either by a writer providing too much or too little information (Tillery, 2001). Many also spoke about the challenges of the expectation for "short and concise" messages, noting concerns that

necessary nuance and complexity could be lost in the focus on easily digestible messages.

Many noted that writing is a collaborative process, requiring intense negotiation of form, style, and ethical boundaries with non-communicators providing input on communications decisions (see Bremner, 2014). Many spoke in favor of establishing an "organizational voice" to be used in formal communications, with many again highlighting the need for balance between copy-and-paste uniformity and loose expectations that could result in a lack of cohesion. They noted that an organization's voice can become a point of differentiation and brand recognition for organizations working in crowded spaces.

Several participants also discussed making intentional improvements to their communications processes, such as adopting inclusive and asset-based language (Kapitan & Kapitan, 2023; Yin, 2024, 2026) or trauma-informed and culturally responsible practices (Madden & Rosso, 2021; Mahliaire, 2024). Additionally, several participants discussed their decision to refuse to follow the Associated Press's directive for omitting the Oxford comma, arguing it creates possibilities for confusion (Kessler, 2024; see Associated Press, 2022). Several participants reported continuing to include the comma despite otherwise following AP style, a decision that showed them prioritizing their professional judgment above prescriptive requirements (see Tillery, 2001).

8.2. Theoretical interpretation

At first, traditional public relations scholars may have seen the premise of this dissertation to be a dramatic restructuring of professional responsibility in public relations. However, when examined through the theoretical framework drawn from sociolinguistics, TPC, and CLA, along with the participants' own words, it becomes evident that professional communicators are already engaging in language work with metalinguistic awareness and ethical

concern. This has simply been left unnamed within public relations scholarship.

The ideas in this dissertation are not new. Despite the popular boogeyman image, public relations scholarship has long argued that communicators have a responsibility to tell the truth—if for no other reason than the fear of losing credibility and their future livelihood (Moss, 2025). The PRSA Code of Ethics (PRSA, 2000) clearly states that communicators have a responsibility for reaching the "highest standards of accuracy and truth." Rather than viewing "truth" as a singular idea that is universally agreed upon, however, this dissertation acknowledges the subjectiveness of truth, particularly when engaging contested social issues.

How this dissertation differs is that it expressly looks at every communicator as an actor who makes countless ethical decisions every day that can make an organization's communications a little more honest or a lot more guarded (Tillery, 2001). It is not just the decisions made by the dominant coalition or senior leaders that matter. These are decisions that communicators, as their organization's experts in language, are uniquely responsible for considering, therefore leaving them with a responsibility for language.

8.2.1. Sociolinguistics

Examining public relations through the lens of sociolinguistics enabled a better understanding of how this professional community is constituted by and responsible for communications. The participants expressed shared expectations for language consistent with the language ideology of vulgar pragmatism (Pennycook, 1997). They consistently discussed words, language, and writing as items to move or influence audiences. This was a strategic focus, not a constitutive understanding of language as the maker of meaning or worlds.

Participants also demonstrated that they qualify as language workers, individuals "for whom words are not only the means of completing their work but the very focus and product of

their work" (Darics & Koller, 2019, p. 215). Writing and language selection were central to how many participants discussed their work and identity (Slack et al., 1993), even though many had duties extending beyond writing and technical execution.

8.2.2. Technical and Professional Communications (TPC)

The participants also presented an awareness of professional responsibility that aligned with TPC's understanding of communicators as authors (Slack et al., 1993). They are not merely capturing words that are then "packaged up" (p. 16) and delivered to their audience. They viewed professional responsibility in ways that aligned with the concepts of authorship and articulation (Slack et al., 1993), making them "complicit in an ongoing articulation and rearticulation of relations of power" (p.14).

In doing so, they frequently questioned the tactical micro-level decisions they make when building communications, decisions Tillery (2001) and others in TPC scholarship have considered. Rather than being about advocacy, participants described the importance of these micro-level decisions in terms of ensuring communications are accessible, respectful, and informative for all audiences (Stovall & Clark, 2022; Wertheim, 2023).

8.2.3. Critical Language Awareness (CLA)

In the context of the dimensions of language awareness presented by Darics et al. (2025), the findings demonstrate that communicators unevenly presented all five dimensions (see **Error! Reference source not found.**).

Visible dimensions. Most notably, the participants demonstrated strong functional-pragmatic awareness, being able to speak at length about the intentional choices they make about how to use language to meet their needs. They also presented strong metalinguistic awareness, an understanding of the formal and functional properties of language choices, along with their

Table 1: Dimensions of Language Awareness	
Metalinguistic awareness	Identifying formal and functional properties of language and multimodal communication
Awareness of linguistic diversity	Appreciating language variation and diversity across speakers, setting, and sociopolitical structures
Functional-pragmatic awareness	Knowing effective language use as appropriateness in context
Awareness of ideology	Recognizing how language is shaped by and helps (re)produce systems of belief, power, and social organization
Constitutive awareness	Understanding that language not only reflects reality, but actively constructs it
Source: Darics et al. (2025)	

social significance. Many talked at length about their language choices, questioning both what words would be considered best for their communication and how best to present them. This concept is best captured in discussions of whether to establish a unique organizational voice, stylistic decisions that can become one of the primary points of identification and differentiation for organizations.

Intermittent dimensions. Participants demonstrated the beginnings of an awareness of ideology, but a focus on execution often forestalled these concerns. Many also expressed a limited awareness of linguistic diversity, with many clarifying that they wished to allow unique voices and stories to be shared, rather than enforcing an "organizational voice" as an authoritative mandate of compliance or assimilation.

This, therefore, fully positions the participants' understanding of professional responsibility as sitting within an appreciation for language's constitutive awareness. In the next chapter, I will discuss the opportunities available through Critical Language Awareness for further developments in the research, teaching, and practice of public relations.

CHAPTER 9. Conclusion

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways the interviews supported this dissertation's foundation in examining communicators as a speech community with a responsibility for language. The participants shared many of the same expectations for language, along with many of the same questions and concerns. In this concluding chapter, I will step back to consider what this means for the future of studying, teaching, and the practice of public relations, including the possibilities of Critical Language Awareness.

9.1. Incorporating Critical Language Awareness into public relations

The participating communicators demonstrated that they are already engaging in ethical labor regarding language choices. Many make these decisions based on intuitive gut feelings (Place, 2015). Others defer to other authorities, like their organization's legal departments or the *Associated Press Stylebook*. While this approach has been a workable solution, it does not provide a reliable method for communicators to identify, define, or resolve ethical problems that are not already obvious to them. This gap reveals the need for Critical Language Awareness, with its goals of self-reflection, social justice, and rhetorical agency (Shapiro, 2021).

Therefore, this dissertation argued that communicators have a responsibility for language as their organization's stewards of relationships built on trust, transparency, and accountability. Discussions about socially responsible communication often focus on the need for organizations to send messages in response to particular moments and issues (see Chalmer, 2024; Lee, 2024). However, audiences have been clear: Organizations should not send statements **unless** they will support them through the organization's external actions and internal practices (Yim, 2021). This expectation creates a new level of complexity and an assumed responsibility for communication professionals that has not yet been fully articulated in the public relations literature. It demands

attention to the integrity of language, rather than merely strategic effectiveness.

Importantly, the intention of incorporating CLA into public relations literature, pedagogy, and practice is not to argue that all communicators must become disrupters or activists—individuals making arguments and taking action solely based on personal conviction. Instead, advancing Critical Language Awareness is a matter of sensitizing communicators' awareness to recognize that they are making language decisions with ethical implications. This demonstrates that advancing Critical Language Awareness is a means for equipping communications to fully realize the ethical responsibility already embedded in their professional role. It is not an expectation that all communicators actively argue with leaders or a statement that all should engage in "last resort approaches" (Neill et al., 2024, p. 122) like whistleblowing. Instead, it is a call for communicators to ask whether the individual words they are putting on the page are the best for their specific organizational context.

9.2. Future implications

The findings of this research provide considerable opportunities to expand public relations theory, pedagogy, and practice.

9.2.1. Implications for theory

Importantly, this dissertation recommended extending organizational conscience theory (Bowen, 2008; Neill & Drumwright, 2012) by turning its attention inward to examine the decisions communicators make when doing language work. This asks what it means to use language and rhetoric responsibly, including questions of how values are enacted through language and what stakes exist when organizations succeed or fail in doing this.

This study, furthermore, recommends placing language work into the basic conception of communicators' responsibility, making it worthy of formal study and teaching. Within current

frameworks, students and practitioners are not challenged to think about the unique insights they bring to their organization due to their interest in language.

For role theory (Dozier & Broom, 1995), it invites further investigation of the traditional division between managers and technicians, drawing attention to the decisions made by communicators at all levels. Furthermore, for relationship management, it prompts scholars to question what it means to enact the dimensions of organization-public relationships *in words and practice* (Ledingham, 2003), turning attention to the integrity of communication, rather than a sole focus on outcomes and organizational intent.

9.2.2. Implications for pedagogy

In a comparison of approaches to ethical instruction in the public relations curriculum, Bowen and Erzikova (2013) argued that conversations in the United States emphasize questions of compliance and professionalism while European instruction encourages critical thinking and moral autonomy. Students and communicators in the United States are urged to memorize ethical codes. Instructors are encouraged to have students practice possible responses through case studies or simulations (Silverman et al., 2014), including scenarios requiring whistleblowing or other "last resort approaches" (Neill et al., 2024, p. 122; see Greenwood, 2022). Ethical conversations become a matter of recognizing the coming ethical "cliff" and steering clear with the appropriate response.

Respectfully, I posit that the findings of this research demonstrate this to be an oversimplification of how ethical situations develop within a workforce. Across the interviews, the participants demonstrated that ethical situations do not show up with warning bells or a singular moment when the person fully knows they have a choice of "good" or "evil." Instead, ethical concerns developed over time from the unquestioned continuation of existing practice or

the slow buildup of decisions about language and other matters—each seemingly insignificant on its own. Often, participants had a nagging feeling that something was wrong, but they could not name it—let alone identify a solution while also getting their other work done.

There are important implications in this gap between how ethics is taught and the reality of practice. It shows that it is not enough to prepare communicators to recognize singular ethical violations. Instead, instruction must encourage critical thinking to address the ways ethical concerns "creep" in due to ambiguity and unquestioned practice. Critical Language Awareness provides a helpful framework for this shift in that it prepares students and practitioners to recognize the ethical weight and significance in the micro-level decisions they make when creating communications (Tillery, 2001). It encourages students and practitioners to see themselves as ethical actors who make countless ethical decisions every day (see Swerzenski, 2022). This will be particularly needed as communicators craft messages on contentious issues of open debate:

> There is broad agreement that it is inappropriate for public relations practitioners to engage in intentional acts of mis/disinformation… or other forms of 'organized lying' (Arendt, 1968, 1971 as cited in Edwards, 2024, p. 169). But how can someone know the lines when they are working on behalf of an organization, particularly in spaces where there are multiple opinions about what is right? **How can practitioners identify when optimistically emphasizing their organization's preferred narrative goes too far and becomes about hiding or ignoring contrary opinions?** (Boone, 2025, p. 23, emphasis added)

Communications on issues where there is not a singularly accepted solution create new questions for communicators. Instead of taking writing decisions for granted, students and communicators

Table 2: Ways of "doing" Critical Language Awareness in public relations			
	Definition	**Type of Action**	**Example of CLA in public relations**
Agency	Awareness and intentional adjustment of one's own language use	Personal and reflective action	• Critical examining word choices while drafting a statement • Exploring inclusive language and related concerns
Advocacy	Public stance-take to promote ethical language use and challenge harmful norms	Position-taking and influencing others	• Intentionally adopting inclusive language or trauma-informed communications practices
Activism	Public intervention to challenge dominant discourses and co-create alternatives	Collective and systemic intervention	• Actively engaging in narrative change • Educating other organizations about language concerns
Source: Adapted from Darics et al. (2025), p. 12			

will be better prepared to understand their ethical responsibility once they realize that every decision—from word choice to the length of the message—could be decided differently if they wished. Then, they will know to ask themselves and others what priorities and logics exist to justify those decisions and how/if they could be different.

9.2.3. Implications for practice

Despite the commitments to practice outlined in Chapter 1, these findings suggest that further development is needed before Critical Language Awareness can be meaningfully implemented in public relations. At the same time, these conversations demonstrate that participants are interested in engaging with these ideas, sitting in a state of agency and interested in advancing to advocacy and activism (see Table 2: Ways of "doing" Critical Language Awareness in public relations). For those wishing to begin exploration, I have included a variety of academic- and practitioner-facing resources in the references list for this dissertation,

including *The Conscious Style Guide* book and website (Yin, 2024, 2026) and *Radical Copyeditor* (Kapitan, n.d.).

9.3. Limitations

This study relies on a small number of semi-structured interviews. Many of the participants were from my personal and professional networks, so they were more likely to share my experience and views.

Furthermore, self-selection bias almost certainly played a role in my conversations, with most participants already having spent time considering language and writing (Hiratsuka, 2025). As I did not attempt to gather a representative sample or otherwise survey the broader population, I cannot make claims about this data extending beyond the participants. I was particularly happy, however, to recruit a wide range of professional specializations and identities (see 6.2 for participant demographics and Appendix A, Table A.1 for a further summary).

As with all forms of insider research, my prior experiences with the field create opportunities and limitations (Greene, 2014). It shaped every part of this project, from what questions I asked to how I understood the participants' responses. Notably, several participants paused during the interviews to ask whether they should take time to explain industry best practices or experiences we shared, so others may have omitted them without asking.

Finally, I must acknowledge the moment in time that I did these interviews, August-October 2025. This is a period of change. Many organizations are quickly turning tasks over to artificial intelligence, with multiple participants commenting on the speed of this transition. This was also a period of political upheaval with President Trump returning to the White House at the beginning of the year. Many corporations and organizations have backed away from their previously established commitments regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion (Gretzinger et al.,

2025; Murray & Bohannon, 2025), with those remaining seeking ways to ensure the legitimacy of their activities (Treviño & Balkin, 2026). It, therefore, seems likely that the results of my interviews would have been very different if I had done this study five or ten years earlier, with more communicators now having a familiarity and affinity for DEI-related concerns and activities (see Graham & Assevero, 2021; IPR & Wakeman Agency, 2021).

Rather than erasing the need, however, I passionately believe this moment demands that public relations shift its attention to Critical Language Awareness. We know Generative Artificial Intelligence can—and likely will—be used to complete many of the basic writing tasks currently done by communicators, particularly entry-level tasks like drafting media advisories and press releases (Ward, 2026). Indeed, some scholars have long argued that the industry's evolution no longer demands extended attention to writing in the curriculum (Bowen, 2014).

The importance of writing instruction and attention to language has never sat in technical execution alone, however. Instead, it is an avenue for each student and practitioner to think of themselves as critical actors who are making decisions according to logics they may or may not know. As Casey explained, this includes the need to understand implicit bias:

> [For writing instruction] I would say grammar is 101. And then you absolutely have to include inclusive language… and you have to get PR people dealing with their bias as soon as possible. Because they don't know that it's there, and it is informing everything that they write, who they have in their photos, what kind of customers they focus on, the kind of angle they take on a story… It informs all of those decisions.

Despite the certainty of prescriptivist writing rules and writing templates, most aspects of writing are matters of judgment and interpretation. That is why, in teaching students the frameworks of Critical Language Awareness, public relations instructors and educators will best prepare the

next generation of students to be excellent communicators who understand their responsibility as a speech community of language workers with a responsibility for language.

9.4. Areas for future research

This study highlights several directions for future research. On a foundational level, I encourage researchers to survey public relations practitioners or conduct a census to reassess how writing fits within job responsibilities. This work could build on prior reevaluations of responsibilities related to digital communication (Bernhard & Russmann, 2023), and it should consider both formal and everyday uses of language. Next, there is a clear opportunity for theoretical expansion, particularly in articulating what it means to apply the ethical conscious theory to communications decisions and how it would be applied at differing levels of authority/experience. I also encourage consideration of what it will mean to incorporate Critical Language Awareness in the public relations curriculum, both inside and outside of writing classes. One avenue I find particularly intriguing would be to consider how to adapt Shapiro's (2021) Critical Academic Literacies pathway (Chapter 5) to the unique circumstances of public relations. Finally, I encourage exploration of the micro-level decisions communicators make as they engage in language work. In doing so, researchers can find opportunities and useful guidance in the social justice turn in technical and professional communication (Agboka & Dorpenyo, 2022; Jones, 2016; Jones et al., 2016; Walton et al., 2019).

9.5. Conclusion

A key moment for the academic field of public relations was when Ferguson (1984/2018) argued that relationships should be set at the center of scholarship , displacing a focus on organizations, audiences, or the communications process. This stands as a watershed moment:

The reconceptualization of public relations tore the study and practice from its historic

> moorings in journalism, essentially a craft function, and forced consideration of the field as a management function, grounded in the four-step management process, and held accountable for expenditures for programmatic initiatives. (Ledingham, 2001, p. 287)

With this decision, many scholars pivoted to viewing public relations as a management function. They further argued that communications activities should be considered a "strategic tool" (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 63) for maintaining relationships, rather than a primary focus.

In recommending a repositioning of communicators to be seen as language workers, this dissertation does not seek to undo the changes developed through the foregrounding of relationships. Instead, in the spirit of bridging normative and critical scholarship (see Chapter 1), it recommends that students and communicators must be trained to see critically examining language as part of their responsibility for caring for relationships.

Doing so requires careful attention to the appropriate level of focus. If one zooms in too close and focuses only on communicators as people who write words, the opportunities gained from entering the dominant coalition will be lost—both for the field and any individual communicator wishing to contribute their unique insights to their organization. If one maintains the current wide view, however, students and communicators remain unprepared to appreciate the power and choices they hold. They will continue to manage reactions and backlash to language choices, but they will not be encouraged to identify and address concerns proactively.

Ultimately, while the field's emphasis on connecting communication work to strategy and relationships should not be lost, these findings demonstrate the need to reexamine the field's foundations. Writing should not be seen simply as a task to be completed or the vehicle for getting work done. It, instead, should be recognized for what it is: the work that ensures audiences can believe an organization's statements and values.

CHAPTER 10. Appendices

APPENDIX A. Participant information

Table A.1: Participant information

ID	Name	Yrs	Role (Specialty)	Industry	E[14]	P[15]	Other Experience	Form
PR_1	**Adam**	20	Writer	Public relations	A	O	Advertising agency	Zoom
PR_2	**Anne**	20	PR and marketing leader	Higher education	C	S/G	Journalist	Zoom
PR_3	**Ben**	10	Strategic comms director	Health care	H	M		Email
PR_4	**Calliope**	40	Vice president & writer (Corporate comms)	Public relations	A	M	Journalist, Author	Zoom
PR_5	**Casey**	17	Consultant	DEI comms	C	S/G	Internal comms	Zoom
PR_6	**Elizabeth**	15	Marketing and comms director	Foundation	H	M		Zoom
PR_7	**Fiona**	10	Writer	Health care	H	S/G	Freelance writer	Zoom
PR_8	**Jill**	20	Comms professional (Infrastructure and investments)	Corporate communications	C	M		Zoom
PR_9	**Julie**	16	Consultant	Science comms	C	S/G		Zoom
PR_10	**Lexi**	15	Marketing specialist	Nonprofit Tech	H	M	Advertising agency	Zoom
PR_11	**Mark**	14	Digital strategist (Racial justice)	Nonprofit	H	T		Zoom
PR_12	**Martha**	35	Agency president	Public interest communications	A	M		Zoom
PR_13	**Molly**	10	Comms professional	State government	H	T		Zoom
PR_14	**Nina**	30	Content marketer	Higher education	H	S/G		Email
PR_15	**Paul**	10	Strategic comms director	Higher education	H	S/G	Public interest comms	Zoom
PR_16	**Penelope**	10	Cofounder (Academic research)	Strategic comms	C	S/G		Zoom
PR_17	**Randall**	10	Digital strategist	Nonprofit	H	T		Zoom
PR_18	**Richard**	20	Director of corporate comms	Food corporation	H	M	State government, Spokesperson	Zoom
PR_19	**Silvia**	20	Behavioral comms consultant	Public relations	A	M	Professor, Author	Zoom
PR_20	**Sophia**	5	Comms director (Anti-racism)	Higher education	H	M	Neuroscience, Public health	Zoom
PR_21	**Stella**	20	Founder & CEO (Business-to-business)	Public relations	C	M		Zoom
PR_22	**Tom**	23	Public affairs	Military	H	M	Enlisted service member	Zoom

[14] Employment type = A (Agency), C (Consultant), H (In house)

[15] Position Type = M (Management), T (Technician), S/G (Solo communicator or generalist who does both), O (Other)

APPENDIX B. Interview guide summary sent to participants

Study Title: What's right in what we write? Examining the language ideologies, metalingual awareness, and writing practices of the public relations industry

This interview will be a semi-structured conversation. It is intended to be a free-flowing dialogue, where I may ask follow-up questions or share my own experiences as a communications professional.

To be clear:

- **There are no right or wrong answers.** I am interested in how you think about language.
- **Managers**: I know you may not have as much writing in your day-to-day activities. I am interested in understanding how you view language and what it means for how you manage teams, review communications, and/or provide counsel to leadership.

Professional background & writing habits

- We will begin with some general questions about your career path and how/why you came to work in public relations or strategic communications.
- We will also discuss your day-to-day writing responsibilities, including the types of writing, your primary audiences, and what percentage of your time is dedicated to writing.

Writing process & style

- I will ask about your professional writing practices, including how you start, what you think about, and what tools, templates, or style guides you use.
- We will discuss your thoughts about the need for a consistent organizational voice and/or the appropriateness of adjusting language/style based on the audience.

Language, beliefs, & responsibility

- We will explore what "professional language" means to you and how your views on it may have changed over time.
- We will talk about the ethical responsibility you feel for the messages you write, including how you ensure language is fair, accurate, and respectful to different communities.
- We will also explore if there are unique circumstances or pressures for professional communicators that shape how you think about concepts like truth and transparency.

Targeted terms and closing reflections

- I will ask how you define a few specific terms, like "organizational voice" or "being on message," and what they mean to you in a professional context.
- I will ask what else is important for understanding language and professional responsibility.
- I will discuss the next steps, including the possibility of reviewing the transcript.

APPENDIX C. Synchronous interview guide

I will use a semi-structured interview format. It is intended to allow a free-flowing conversation where I can ask about topics that arise. Additionally, as appropriate, I will also share connections with my experiences as a professional communicator.

Each interview will be different, so we will not cover all these questions. Questions in bold are the items I consider of higher priority.

Introduction

- I am conducting this research as part of my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Oregon. I am interested in how public relations practitioners use and think about language. This research comes from questions I had while working as a communicator for fifteen years.
- I want this to be a conversation where we will both reflect on our knowledge and experiences. There are no "right" or "wrong" answers to these questions. It is really about understanding your thinking.
- I am recording this session to help with my notetaking, but all your answers are confidential. I will use a pseudonym when preparing all my notes and the final paper.
    - Do you have a preference for your pseudonym and how I should refer to your role/industry?
- Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section 1: Background

- **How did you come to work in public relations and/or professional communications? Can you describe what past experiences led you here?**
    - Years of experience
    - Agency, in-house, consultant?
    - Do you manage people?
    - Different types of roles you have held, sectors worked in
- **What is your educational background, especially regarding language or writing?**
- **How significant is the act of writing for your job?**
    - What percentage of your time is dedicated to writing?
    - What percentage of your writing is created collaboratively versus alone?
    - What is your role in writing communications? Initial author, reviewer, both, or other?
- What types of writing do you do?
- What are the primary audiences for your communications?
- When thinking of your job, first broadly, how would you describe your professional and ethical responsibility?

- And what about your work with writing and language specifically—things like tone, phrasing, and choosing how or what to say? What kind of responsibility do communicators have for identifying potential concerns or staying informed about evolving language?

Section 2: Text production and language use

- **When you sit down to write something, what is going through your head? What is your process?**
  - Are you focusing more on the technical side (formatting, structure, clarity) or on crafting a message?
  - Do you consider concerns that extend beyond getting the content right—such as how something sounds, how it might be perceived, or how inclusive it feels?
  - Do you consider what will resonate with your audience, or how/if a message reflect the values of your organization?
  - **What about the process of selecting the words that will on the page? What are you thinking about as you do that?**
- **What tools, templates, or style guides do you use in your writing?**
  - Why those? Are they things you selected/made, or were they given to you?
  - Are there certain types of writing you do based on habit versus others that take more thinking? How did you learn them?
- **Is having an in-house style guide important for an organization?**
  - If yes, why?
    - What does it address?
    - Were you involved in creating it? Do you know how/why choices were made?
    - Have you had instances where you disagreed or questioned what it stated? What did you do?
  - If no, why not?
- **Can you think of a time when you changed specific words or phrasing in a message to make it clearer or more accurate? Walk me through what you changed and why.**
  - What was the original language?
  - Why were you concerned?
  - What revision did you make/suggest?
  - What was the result?
- **Can you think of an example of a time when you got stuck due to not being certain what words were considered correct or appropriate?**
  - What did you do?
  - Why was it confusing?

- ⊄ Did you use any resources to help? That could include formal items, such as dictionaries and style guides, or other individuals or groups.
- ⊄ How did that experience make you feel?
- ⊄ Did it cause you to make any changes in your practices or thoughts going forward?

∉ Can you provide an example of a time when you had to write in a style that was significantly different from your own?

∉ **How important do you think it is for an organization to have a single organizational voice?**

- ⊄ If important
  - Why is that important?
  - Does the expectation apply to all staff or formal communications?
  - How should that be taught or enforced?
  - Should there be training/resources?
  - Does it apply to all audiences or specific subsets?
- ⊄ If not important
  - What harm do you see in that process/expectation? What could be lost?

Section 3: Language beliefs and standards

∉ **What does "professional language" mean to you?**

- ⊄ Why is that professional?
- ⊄ Has your opinion of that changed over time? Why, or why not?

∉ **What ethical responsibility do you feel in relation to the messages you write? How do you handle them?**

- ⊄ **What do you consider the ethical line for the idea of truth?**
  - If necessary: For example, I assume that we can both agree that it would be unethical to say something you absolutely know to be false. But what if we are discussing something where there are multiple opinions on the right answer—all the ideas having some good points and some not-so-good points. What is your responsibility to communicate all the information?
- ⊄ **Have you ever been concerned that the language you used—or were asked to use—could exclude, offend, or misrepresent someone? What did you do?**
- ⊄ Have you ever considered whether you are using language that could allow for multiple interpretations or meanings? Why or why not?
- ⊄ Have you considered whether there are messages you would refuse to write?

∉ **What are the expectations you want to keep in mind for form and style?**

∉ **Are there competing pressures you feel when writing and/or communicating regarding form and style? Examples, if needed:**

- ⊄ **Balancing the need for clarity with being concise?**
- ⊄ **How to be persuasive while also being truthful and transparent?**

∉ Are there certain language concerns that you try to stay aware of? One example is the use of identity-specific and inclusive language.

- ⊄ Where do you look for that information, and how do you stay informed?

Section 4: Targeted terms task

∉ **I am going to read a few terms or phrases that have come up in writing guides or professional publications. For each, can you tell me what it means to you—and how you would use or interpret it in your work? I am interested in both the literal meaning and any expectations attached to them.**

- ⊄ **"Professional language"**
- ⊄ **"Organizational voice"**
- ⊄ "Brand personality"
- ⊄ "On message"
- ⊄ "Concise writing"
- ⊄ "Conversational"
- ⊄ "Transparency"
- ⊄ "Authenticity"
- ⊄ "Clarity"

∉ **What are other terms you think are important for discussing public relations or professional writing?**

∉ **And finally, for a more abstract question, when you think about the word "writing"—Do you first think of it as an action you do or something that exists? Is it a noun or a verb first?**

Final questions/Debrief

∉ *If AI has not come up*, What role do you envision AI having in the writing or content development process going forward?

- ⊄ Have you incorporated GenAI into your writing process? How do you use it?
- ⊄ Probe, if yes: Have you changed how you write or work because of it?
- ⊄ What do you use? Is it a public or proprietary tool?
- ⊄ What do you think is its most/least effective use?

∉ **Are there other topics you thought I would discuss based on my stated interest of "language and professional responsibility?"**

∉ **Are you interested in reviewing a transcript of this interview?** I will anonymize it by removing any specific names or references, but I also want to give you the opportunity to examine for any other concerns. One example could be if you provided examples with

enough detail to make the situation identifiable, despite not saying names or other items I would know to anonymize.

APPENDIX D. Email interview guide

Thank you for agreeing to answer my interview questions over email. I have included six questions of interest below, but you can also feel free to share other thoughts. So you are aware, I may email again for further information or to ask for clarification. Would it be possible for you to return your responses by [INSERT DATE]?

- How did you come to work in public relations and/or professional communications? Can you describe what past experiences led you here?
- What is your educational background, especially regarding language or writing?
- How important do you think it is for an organization to have a single organizational voice? What is gained or lost through this act?
- What ethical responsibility do you feel in relation to the messages you write? How do you handle them?
- What tools, templates, or style guides do you use in your writing?
- Are the other topics you thought I would address based on my interest in "language and professional responsibility?"

APPENDIX E. Demographic survey

- Screen 1 -

Thank you for participating in an interview for my dissertation. I truly appreciate you sharing your insights with me.

To give my dissertation readers information about my participants without compromising anyone's identity, I have created this brief and voluntary survey. The information you provide will be presented as a summary in my final publication, ensuring your responses remain completely confidential.

I wish to acknowledge that demographic labels can be limiting. As such, you have the option to provide your own answer or decline to respond to any or all of the questions.

At the start of the survey, you will be asked to provide an email so a $15 gift card can be sent to you as a thank you for your participation. Your help with this research is invaluable.

- Screen 2 -

Please complete this question even if you do not want a gift card. This is how I am tracking completion.

Provide your email below so you can be sent an electronic $15 gift card. This email will be deleted once the compensation process is complete to avoid the inclusion of identifying information. If you do not want a gift card, please provide your email and then say something like "no gift card." Please be aware, compensation for participation in research studies may be considered taxable income.

What is your email?

Do you want to end the survey?

Select option A if you do not want to answer the other survey questions. This will submit your survey. Select B or C to move forward.

- A Select this to submit the survey without answering other questions.
- B Select this to move ahead.
- C Select this to move ahead.

- Screen 3 -

Do you have a preference for a gift card from a specific business? I will do my best to fulfill your request. You can also state here if you do not want a gift card.

- Screen 4 -

Demographics

What is your age in years?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65-74
- 75 or older
- I prefer not to answer

Which of the following best describes your gender identity?

- Man
- Woman
- Nonbinary
- Other, please specific
- I prefer not to answer

Which of the following labels best describes your ethnic origin?

- Hispanic or Latino
- Not Hispanic or Latino
- I prefer not to answer

Which of the following general labels align with how you describe yourself racially: (mark ALL that apply)

- Asian
- Black
- Indigenous, Aboriginal, or First Nation
- Middle Eastern
- White
- Other, please specify
- I prefer not to answer

Do you use any language other than English fluently or with near fluency?

- No
- Yes, please specify
- I prefer not to answer

Do you use any languages other than English at work?

- No
- Yes, please specify
- I prefer not to answer

Education

Which of the following is the highest degree or level you earned or completed?

- High school diploma, GED, or alternative credential
- Technical, trade, or vocational school certificate or apprenticeship
- Associate's degree (for example: AA, AS, AAA, AAS)
- Bachelor's degree (for example: BA, BS)
- Master's degree (for example: MA, MBA, MEd, Meng, MS, MSW)
- Professional degree beyond the bachelor's degree (for example: DDS, DVM, JD, MD, Pharm, PsyD)
- Doctoral degree (for example: EdD, PhD)
- Other, please specific
- I prefer not to answer

Was your highest degree related to public relations, strategic communications, or another field related to your current work? (Select ALL that apply)

- Strategic communication/public relations
- Advertising
- Marketing
- Journalism
- English/Composition
- I did not do a relevant degree
- Other, please specify
- I prefer not to answer

Have you earned the Accreditation in Public Relations (APR)?

- Yes, I am currently APR certified
- No, I was, but I am no longer APR certified
- No, I am working on earning my APR certification
- No, I am not APR certified
- I prefer not to answer

- Screen 5 -

Work Information

Do you work in house, in an agency, or some other option? If you are currently unemployed, please answer for your most recent job.

- Work in house (an employee who works and does communication for one organization)
- Work in an agency (a consultant who works at an agency that has many clients)
- Works as an independent consultant/contractor
- Other, please specify
- I prefer not to answer

Generally, what do you consider your position?

- Manager (I mange other people)
- Technician (I do the day-to-day communications work)
- Solo communicator or generalist (I do it all)
- Other type of employee, please specify
- I prefer not to answer

What type of employee are you? (mark ALL that apply)

- Private sector employee
- Nonprofit sector
- Government employee
- Self-employed or For-profit family business employee
- Currently unemployed
- Other type of employee, please specify
- I prefer not to answer

Writing Practices

What percentage of your time is spent on writing projects? This can be all forms of writing.

- 0-25%
- 26-50%
- 50-75%
- 75-100%
- I prefer not to answer

How are your writing projects normally performed?

- Writing and/or reviewing writing is not a substantial part of my work
- I generally draft communications that are then edited/approved by others
- Others draft communications that I edit/approve
- I primarily write alone
- Other, please specify
- I prefer not to answer

- Screen 6 -

We thank you for your time spent taking this survey.

Your response has been recorded.

- End Survey -

APPENDIX F. Consent form

Title:	What's right in what we write? Examining the metalingual awareness, language ideologies, and writing practices of the public relations industry[16]
Researcher(s):	Sandra Boone, University of Oregon
Researcher Contact Info:	sboone@uoregon.edu

Key Information to Consider (more information on next page)

- **Voluntary Consent**. You are being asked to volunteer for a research study. It is up to you whether you choose to participate or not. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled if you choose not to participate or discontinue participation.
- **Purpose**. This research explores how public relations practitioners think about language, writing, and professional responsibility.
- **Researcher's identity.** Sandra Boone is a Communications and Media Studies Ph.D. candidate at the University of Oregon. She worked as a professional communicator for 15 years in higher education, nonprofits, and politics. Learn more at boonesk.com/about.
- **Duration.** Zoom or in-person interviews are scheduled for 55 minutes. Email participants are asked to return their answers within two weeks of receiving the questions.
- **Activities.** The interview will contain a series of open-ended questions focused on your professional experiences and practices and the thoughts/values that guide these choices. The interview is meant to be conversational, so I will also share my experiences as a practitioner.
- **Preparation.** For Zoom/in-person interviews, I will send you a list of questions I have prepared to guide our conversation, although I may make changes as the interview progresses. This is intended to give you time to reflect, but you are not required to do so before the interview.
- **Procedures.** The interview can be done on Zoom, in person, or email.
- **Completion.** You will receive a thank you email after the interview. This email will give you a link to complete a voluntary demographics questionnaire and collect compensation. You will either need to complete the demographic questionnaire or select "I prefer not to answer" on each question to claim your gift card.
- **Transcript.** I will also ask you at the interview if you want to review the transcript. If you agree, I will send it with some reflection questions within two weeks. If you do not respond, I will assume you approve the transcript.
- **Recording.** The video, audio, or written recordings will be used for transcription. The transcript will be anonymized, and the recordings will be destroyed when analysis is complete.
- **Risks.** The risks associated with this research are judged to be minimal. They may include stress, emotional distress, inconvenience, and possible loss of privacy and confidentiality associated with participating in a research study.
- **Benefits**. There is no direct benefit to participants. Participants could gain value from the opportunity to reflect or share questions/concerns.
- **Alternatives.** Participation is voluntary, and the only alternative is not to participate.

[16] I later updated this title.

Why is this research being done?

I am conducting this research as part of my doctoral dissertation. It explores how public relations practitioners understand language and writing, including its ethical implications. I chose this project because of the questions I had while working on responsible language choices.

What will be the experience of synchronous versus asynchronous interviews?

I want you to participate in the way that is most comfortable, so I am offering both live (synchronous) conversations and email (asynchronous) exchanges. From a research quality perspective, **Zoom interviews are preferred**. They offer the greatest flexibility for scheduling and conversation, and Zoom also provides built-in recording/transcription features.

Here is a further comparison, and please ask if you have any questions.

Synchronous Conversational Interviews

Interviews will be held on Zoom or in person.

Availability: Zoom video interviews can happen any time between August 2025 and November 2025. Due to Sandra's travel schedule, in-person interviews can only occur in Minnesota in August and September 2025, or in Oregon in October and November 2025.

Preparation: You are not required to do anything before the interview. However, I will send a list of questions so you can familiarize yourself with the topics, reflect, and identify any items you do not want to discuss.

I ask that you identify a place to do the interview that is quiet. For Zoom interviews, please confirm that there is reliable internet.

Recording: The interviews will be audio-recorded on a computer and iPhone. For Zoom interviews, I ask that you turn your video on, but you do not need to. If you do, your video will also be recorded.

How we will interact: Zoom or in-person interviews will allow a full back-and-forth conversation. I can ask follow-up questions and engage more actively by sharing my own relevant insights or experiences.

Asynchronous Written Interviews (Email)

You will receive interview questions and return your answers in writing. The email will be sent from sboone5@uoregon.edu, a secure institutional email account.

Availability: These exchanges can happen at any time during data collection, occurring from August 2025 through November 2025. I ask that you return your answers within two weeks of receiving the questions.

Recording: Your complete written exchange will be saved as data for the interview. It will be anonymized and saved in secure file on the University of Oregon's secure Microsoft OneDrive. The email messages will immediately be deleted from the researcher's email once securely stored. For your privacy, you should also delete the email from your inbox/sent items.

How will we interact: Responding in writing will give you maximum flexibility to think about and carefully write your answers. This can lead to very thoughtful and detailed responses. I may email follow-up questions to further understand.

However, email interviews are likely to be a one-directional question-and-answer format, so I will not share my experiences in the same manner as the live interviews.

Conclusion: You will receive an email with a link to complete a demographic questionnaire and claim your gift card. You can decline to answer any/all questions and claim the gift card.

What will happen to the information collected for this research?

The information you provide will be used for research purposes. The findings are intended to be shared with public relations and strategic communication researchers, educators, students, and practitioners. This may include a doctoral dissertation, peer-reviewed journal articles, and presentations at academic conferences. They may also be shared in a book or other practitioner-focused publications.

What if I want to stop participating in this research?

Taking part in this research study is your decision. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You do not have to take part in this study, but if you do, you can stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Your decision of whether or not to participate will not affect your relationship with the researchers or the University of Oregon.

Your information will then be discarded. It will not be used for analysis.

Will I be paid for participating in this research?

You will be given a $15 gift card for your time. You will receive an email within two weeks with directions to claim the gift card.

Who can answer my questions about this research?

If you have questions, concerns, or experience a research-related injury, contact:
Sandra Boone
sboone5@uoregon.edu

An Institutional Review Board ("IRB") is overseeing this research. An IRB is a group of people who perform independent review of research studies to ensure the rights and welfare of participants are protected. UO Research Compliance Services is the office that supports the IRB. If you have questions about your rights or wish to speak with someone other than the research team, you may contact:

Research Compliance Services
5237 University of Oregon
Eugene, OR 97403-5237
(541) 346-2510
ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu

CONFIRMATION OF ELIGIBILITY

Do you meet the following criteria?

1. Are you 18 years of age or older?
2. Do you currently reside in the United States and work primarily for U.S.-based organizations or clients?
3. Do you have at least five years of experience working in public relations, strategic communication, or a related professional communication function?
4. Have you held at least one role involving a substantial writing component?
5. Do you complete the majority of your work in English?

STATEMENT OF CONSENT

1. Do you have any questions?
2. As a reminder, live interviews will be audio and/or video recorded for data analysis.
3. Do you want to review the transcript?
4. Do you agree to participate?

You will be asked to confirm your agreement verbally at the start of the interview (or in writing for email exchanges). A signed consent form is not required for this study.

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