R. Craig Hogan, a former university professor who heads an online school for business writing here, received an anguished e-mail message recently from a prospective student.

"I need help," said the message, which was devoid of punctuation. "I am writing an essay on writing. I work for this company and my boss wants me to help improve the workers' writing skills. Can you help me with some information? Thank you.

Hundreds of inquiries from managers and executives seeking to improve their own or their workers' writing pop into Dr. Hogan's computer in-basket each month, he says, describing a number that has surged as e-mail has replaced the phone for much workplace communication. Millions of employees must write more frequently on the job than previously. And many are making a hash of it.

"E-mail is a party to which English teachers have not been invited," Dr. Hogan said. "It has companies tearing their hair out." A recent survey of 120 American corporations reached a similar conclusion. The study, by the National Commission on Writing, a panel established by the College Board, concluded that a third of employees in the nation's blue-chip companies wrote poorly and that businesses were spending as much as $3.1 billion annually on remedial training.

The problem shows up not only in e-mail but also in reports and other texts, the commission said.

"It's not that companies want to hire Tolstoy," said Susan Traiman, a director at the Business Roundtable, an association of leading chief executives whose corporations were surveyed in the study. "But they need people who can write clearly, and many employees and applicants fall short of that standard."

Millions of inscrutable e-mail messages are clogging corporate computers by setting off requests for clarification, and many of the requests, in turn, are also chaotically written, resulting in whole cycles of confusion.

Here is one from a systems analyst to her supervisor at a high-tech corporation based in Palo Alto, Calif.: "I updated the Status report for the four discrepancies Lennie forward us via e-mail. I thought my logic was correct. It seems we provide Murray with incorrect information. However, after verifying controls on JBL, JBL has the indicator as B. I wanted to make sure with the recent changes -- before Murray makes the changes again on the mainframe to 'C'."

The incoherence of that message persuaded the analyst's employers that she needed remedial training.

"The more electronic and global we get, the less important the spoken word has become, and in e-mail clarity is critical,"