12 Tips for Improving Your Business Writing

Communication Featured
By Dustin Wax
Today's business world is almost entirely information-driven. Whether you run a small business or occupy a small corner of the org-chart at a massive multinational corporation, chances are that the bulk of your job consists of communicating with others, most often in writing. Of course there's email and the traditional business letter, but most business people are also called on to write presentations, memos, proposals, business requirements, training materials, promotional copy, grant proposals, and a wide range of other documents.

Here's the rub: **most business people have little experience with writing**. While those with business degrees probably did a bit of writing in school, it's rarely stressed in business programs, and learning to write well is hardly the driving force behind most people's desire to go to business school. Those without a university background might have never been pushed to write at all, at least since public school.

If you're one of the many people in business for whom writing has never been a major concern, you should know that **a lack of writing skills is a greater and greater handicap with every passing year**. Spending some time to improve your writing can result in a marked improvement in your hire-ability and promotional prospects. There's no substitute for practice, but here are a few pointers to put you on the right track.

1. Less is more.
In business writing as in virtually every other kind of writing, concision matters. **Ironically, as written information becomes more and more important to the smooth functioning of businesses, people are less and less willing to read.** Increasingly, magazines and other outlets that used to run 2,000-word features are cutting back to 500-word sketches. Use words sparingly, cut out the florid prose, and avoid long, meandering sentences. As Zorro taught his son, "Get in, make your Z, and get out!" – get straight to the point, say what you want to say, and be done with it.

2. Avoid jargon.
Everyone in business hates business writing, all that "blue-sky solutioneering" and those "strategical synergies" that ultimately, mean nothing; "brainstorming" and "opportunities to work together" are more meaningful without sounding ridiculous. While sometimes jargon is unavoidable – in a business requirement document or technical specification, for example – try using plainer language. Even for people in the same field as you, jargon is often inefficient – the eye slides right past it without really catching the meaning. **There's a reason that jargon is so often used when a writer wants to not say anything.**

3. Write once, check twice.
Proofread immediately after you write, and then again hours or, better yet, days later. **Nothing is more embarrassing than a stupid typo in an otherwise fine document.** It's hardly fair – typos happen! – but people judge you for those mistakes anyway, and harshly. Except in the direct emergency, always give yourself time to set your writing aside and come back to it later. The

brain is tricky and will ignore errors that it's just made; some time working on something else will give you the detachment you need to catch those errors before anyone else reads them.

4. Write once, check twice.
I know, I just said this, but I mean something else here. In addition to catching typos and other errors, **putting some time between writing and re-reading your work can help you catch errors of tone that might otherwise escape you and cause trouble**. For instance, when we're upset or angry, we often write things we don't actually want anyone else to read. Make sure your work says what you want it to say, how you want it to say it, before letting it reach its audience.

5. Pay special attention to names, titles, and genders.
OK, there is one thing more embarrassing than a typo: calling Mr. Smith "Ms. Smith" consistently throughout a document.

If you're not positive about the spelling of someone's name, their job title (and what it means), or their gender, either
> **a) check with someone who does know (like their assistant), or**
> **b) in the case of gender, use gender-neutral language.**

"They" and "their" are rapidly becoming perfectly acceptable gender-neutral singular pronouns, despite what your grammar teacher and the self-righteous grammar Nazi down the hall might say.

6. Save templates.
Whenever you write an especially good letter, email, memo, or other document, if there's the slightest chance you'll be writing a similar document in the future, save it as a template for future use. Since rushing through writing is one of the main causes of typos and other errors, **saving time by using a pre-written document can save you the embarrassment of such errors**. Just make sure to remove any specific information – names, companies, etc. – before re-using it – you don't want to send a letter to Mr. Sharif that is addressed to Mrs. O'Toole!

7. Be professional, not necessarily formal.
There's a tendency to think of all business communication as formal, which isn't necessary or even very productive. Formal language is fine for legal documents and job applications, but like jargon often becomes invisible, obscuring rather than revealing its meaning.

At the same time, remember that **informal shouldn't mean unprofessional** – keep the personal comments, off-color jokes, and snarky gossip out of your business communications. Remember that many businesses (possibly yours) are required by law to keep copies of all correspondence – don't email, mail, or circulate anything that you wouldn't feel comfortable having read into the record in a public trial.

8. Remember the 5 W's (and the H)
Just like a journalist's news story, **your communications should answer all the questions relevant to your audience: Who? What? When? Where?**

Why? and How? For example, who is this memo relevant to, what should they know, when and where will it apply, why is it important, and how should they use this information? Use the 5W+H formula to try to anticipate any questions your readers might ask, too.

9. Call to action.
The content of documents that are simply informative are rarely retained very well. Most business communication is meant to achieve some purpose, so make sure they include a call to action – something that the reader is expected to do. Even better, something the reader should do right now. **Don't leave it to your readers to decide what to do with whatever information you've provided** – most won't even bother, and enough of the ones who do will get it wrong that you'll have a mess on your hands before too long.

10. Don't give too many choices.
Ideally, don't give any. If you're looking to set a time for a meeting, give a single time and ask them to confirm or present a different time. At most, give two options and ask them to pick one. **Too many choices often leads to decision paralysis, which generally isn't the desired effect.**

11. What's in it for your readers?
A cornerstone of effective writing is describing benefits, not features. Why should a reader care? For example, nobody cares that Windows 7 can run in 64-bit mode – what they care about is that it can handle more memory and thus run faster than the 32-bit operating system. 64-bits is a feature; letting me get my work done more quickly is the benefit. **Benefits engage readers, since they're naturally most concerned with finding out how they can make their lives easier or better.**

12. Hire a freelancer.
Not a writing tip per se, I know, but good advice nonetheless. **Writing is most likely not your strong suit – if it's important, hire someone for whom writing is their strong suit.** You may think freelancers are only for marketing material, but that's not true – a good freelance writer can produce memos, training manuals, internal letters, corporate newsletters, blog posts, wiki entries, and just about any other kind of writing you can think of. Depending on your needs, you can farm work out as needed or move a freelancer into a cubicle on-site, or work out whatever other arrangements best fit your needs.

Expect to pay at least $30 an hour, and more likely $50 – $125 an hour, for good writing – anyone who charges less is either not very good, or not very business savvy. (These rates are for writers in US metro areas – rates may differ in other parts of the world.) Great writing may require a talent that few of us have, but effective writing is a learnable skill.

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* http://www.lifehack.org/articles/communication/12-tips-for-better-business-writing.html