

Writing at Work: 10 strategies to increase the value of your words

by J. Melody Murdock, Exchange editor

Five seconds can be a long time if you're late for a presentation, making a critical first impression, or waiting for management to approve your business proposal. In the fast-paced realm of corporate communication, time is money and seconds matter.

"You will generally be given only a few seconds to prove that you are worth a hearing," says John Trimble, writing expert and author of Writing with Style.

Concise, clear and accurate writing is vital to the success of your career and to your company's productivity. "You can have the greatest ideas in the world, but they're no good to your company or your career if you can't express them clearly and persuasively," says Gary Blake, manager of the Communication Workshop in Port Washington, New York.

Good writing skills will sell you and your ideas. "Employers notice who can write and communicate well and will trust those who can with important jobs," says John Miller, CEO of Farmland National Beef Packing Company. "Good, clear writing will draw attention to your ideas and help your proposals get accepted."

Taking time to improve writing skills is an investment that pays off. Stephen Reder, a linguist at Portland State University in Oregon, found that among people with a two- or four-year college degree, those with the best writing ability earn, on average, more than three times the income of those with poor writing skills.

If tripling your salary isn't a big enough incentive to improve your writing, consider what Michael Thompson, Marriott School professor of organizational leadership and strategy, has to say: "Working on your ability to condense and clarify ideas through writing is going to help you no matter what you do. Good writing involves a core set of disciplines that transfer into your professional role as a leader and problem-solver."

Experts agree that most business writing could use a little sharpening. Enhance your ability to write clearly and persuasively by adopting ten strategies that will increase the value of your words.

Strategy 1. Organize your thoughts

"Identify the problem or issue first and then write to address it," says Verdis Norton, vice president of strategy at Kraft Foods, Inc. Having a purpose in mind before you begin writing will help you tighten your message and address the issue at hand.

Questions to ask:

Who is my audience?

What is my primary message?

What are my secondary or supporting messages?

What is the appropriate tone?

What action do I want my audience to take?

Strategy 2. Structure your writing

Once you have established a clear purpose, it is important to consider the structure of the message. "Learn and develop a format that works for you," Norton recommends.

Bill Baker, writing consultant and Marriott School professor of management communication, designed a model that works for students and business managers. He calls it OABC - O for opening, A for agenda, B for body, and C for closing.

"The OABC approach gives writers a framework to follow, outlines their messages, and saves time," Baker says. "Applying this model will tremendously improve an organization's writing skills."

Opening

Business professionals want to know the when, where, why and how up front. "If I don't get anywhere after three sentences, I don't have time to keep reading," Miller says.

A good opening is like a thesis statement or a headline; it states the main point first. After reading the opening sentence or two, the reader should know immediately where the document is headed.

For example, read the before and after versions of the sample memo below. The author, Sara Howard, in the before memo doesn't state her recommendation until the last paragraph, leaving her readers confused about her purpose. In the after memo, she revises her opening and states her recommendation in the second sentence, letting her readers know exactly what to expect.

Openings can:

Share background information

State the reason for the message

Refer to previous communication

Define a problem

Provide a conclusion

Give a recommendation

Agenda

When attending a formal business function, guests usually receive a program that outlines the events that will take place. Your reader expects the same courtesy of you. An agenda is a preview or overview of what will follow in the document.

For example, in the after memo, Sara writes a clear agenda outlining what strategies she recommends. She writes, "Carl's strategy includes (a) determining appropriate staff levels, (b) finding qualified staff, and (c) retaining employees."

Body

The body of the document should follow the format outlined in the agenda. It is often best to divide the body into sections, each with a heading that describes the content of that section. For example, notice how Sara, in the after memo, has divided the body of text into three main sections with headings that match the items in the agenda.

Closing

The closing is a good place to tell the readers what you want them to do, or what you will do, and to restate the main ideas discussed in the document.

For example, in the after memo, Sara reaffirms the purpose of her message by recommending that her reader implement one or more of the approaches she has suggested. She follows up by asking him to email her by a specified date.

Be careful not to fall into the routine of ending all your messages with the same sentence. Claire and Gordon May, authors of *Effective Writing: A Handbook for Accountants*, say, "The conclusion should be a meaningful addition to the memo, not just an empty string of words added out of habit."

Strategy 3. Make visual sense to your reader

We live in a world that has become very sensitive to visual stimuli. Readers want information presented to them in a digestible format. Imagine your daily newspaper without design elements: no headlines, columns, pictures, or sidebars--a big mass of solid text. Very few people would read it. Layout and design are essential--they make information accessible to the reader.

Baker stresses the importance of providing access through an approach called HATS--H for headings, A for access, T for typography, and S for spacing. "It is just as important to make visual sense to your audience as it is to make logical sense," he says.

Headings

Use headings as navigation tools to help the reader categorize information. Divide the material into small, digestible units and label the information according to the content of the units using headings and subheadings.

Baker recommends following some sort of heading hierarchy throughout the document to show the levels of division. For example:

FIRST LEVEL: BOLD, ALL CAPS

Second Level: Bold, Initial Caps

Third Level: Italicized, Initial Caps

Access

"Be reader friendly--make the meaningful information in your document accessible," advises Baker. A simple way to cater to your reader is to use bullet points or lists. When you find yourself naming more than three or four items, consider listing them.

The following bulleted list contains other ideas you can implement to make information more accessible:

graphs

charts

tables

photos

illustrations

diagrams

Typography

Typography refers to the appearance of text on a printed page. It can be easy to overlook, but is important to remember if you want to make just the right impression. Here are three typographical elements to consider when preparing your document:

1. **Typeface**--Choose a typeface that is easy to read and doesn't draw attention to itself. A serif font, with small tails, like Times New Roman, is good for body text and headlines because it is easy to read. A sans serif font, without tails, like Arial, is good for headlines, but not for body text. As a general rule, you should not use more than two typefaces in a document.
2. **Type style**--Font styles include regular, italic, bold, and bold italic. Use type styles to help important words or headings stand out.
3. **Type size**--The standard type size for most business documents is 10 to 12 points. For an older audience, increase the type size. For overhead transparencies, PowerPoint presentations, and other visuals that must be seen by an audience, increase the type size appropriately.

Spacing

A document with visual appeal has a good balance between print and white space. White space includes margins, the space between sections, and the space around graphic images.

As a general guideline, plan at least a one-inch margin for the sides and bottoms of documents. Also leave extra space before and after paragraphs, charts, tables, lists, photos, illustrations, graphs, or diagrams.

Strategy 4. Say it simply

"Convoluting sentence structure is all too common in business writing," says Norman Goldstein, editor of the Associated Press Stylebook. Norton agrees. "Many business school graduates write well, but not tightly enough. They often include more than is necessary," he says.

Simple is better. "Let your ideas do the impressing," says Trimble. "If they look banal to you, there's only one remedy: rethink them. Don't try to camouflage their weakness with razzle-dazzle rhetoric."

In essence, keep your writing simple, clear, and direct. Consider the following example:

Convoluting sentence

An increase in employees' rate of pay will not become effective prior to the date on which employees have completed a minimum of 13 weeks' actual work at their regular occupational classification.

Simple, clear sentence

Employees must work at least 13 weeks at their regular jobs before they can receive an increase in pay.

Strategy 5. Choose effective words

Mark Twain said, "The difference between the right word and almost the right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Goldstein counsels business writers to "avoid vagueness, abstraction, and jargon--the triple play of bad writing."

To avoid these pitfalls, use words that communicate your message in the clearest, simplest, most concise

form possible. Why say abate when you can say decrease or reduce? Use your dictionary and thesaurus to your advantage.

The following list provides alternate words and phrases that help eliminate excessive wordiness.

Wordy

Acknowledge receipt of

Along the lines of

Arrived at the conclusion that

Due to the fact that

In accordance with your request

Inasmuch as

In the amount of

In the event that

Prior to

Subsequent to

Upon receipt of

Until such time as

Clear

Thank you for your...

Like

Concluded or decided

Since, because

As you asked

Since

For

If

Before

After

When we receive

Until

Strategy 6. Edit your writing

Thompson explains that there are two types of editing essential for a polished document: macro editing and micro editing. "Less effective writers, when given time to go back over what they've written, will only do micro editing. They focus on the surface features, like spelling and punctuation. Effective writers will go back and first look at the macro issues. They consider content, strategy, tone, and overall organization."

Macro editing

Macro editing requires the writer to look at the big picture. It usually involves rewriting, rearranging, and simplifying. It is a chance to fine tune the document, making sure ideas are effectively and thoroughly presented.

"Don't be afraid of rewriting. Professional writers aren't. Novelist James A. Michener says, "I have never thought of myself as a good writer. Anyone who wants reassurance of that should read one of my first drafts. But I'm one of the world's great rewriters."

Macro editing clarifies text by eliminating unessential words, sentences, or sections. According to William Strunk, writing expert and author of *The Elements of Style*, "A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no

unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts."

Micro editing

Micro editing, or proofreading, "is like the quality-control stage at the end of an assembly line," says Trimble. It means checking for grammar, punctuation, spelling, and typing errors.

Take time to thoroughly proofread what you have written. According to Goldstein, your viability as a writer depends on it. "Nothing can make you lose your credibility faster than misspelled--I mean misspelled--words," he says.

Strategy 7. Get a second opinion

It is often difficult for authors to stand back and take an objective look at their own work. A different set of eyes can add a fresh perspective. Find a colleague or friend who is honest and objective, has good writing skills, and can represent the audience's point of view. Ask him or her to read your document and evaluate the effectiveness of your message.

Baker suggests the following tasks:

Writer's tasks:

Explain the problem and goal

Describe the audience

Explain the strategy being used to accomplish the goal

Invite feedback and input

Be open to suggestions and avoid defensiveness

Reader's task

Listen and read carefully before giving feedback

Identify gaps or weaknesses in content and strategy

Focus on the writing, not on the author

Ask probing questions: "Why? Why not? So what? Why does this matter to the reader? How much will it cost? How long will it take?"

Be honest and tactful

Strategy 8. Make email effective

Email has revolutionized communication. What used to take days or weeks to deliver now takes only seconds. With such speed and ease at our fingertips, it is easy to forget to apply good writing standards to email.

The following rules of style and etiquette are specifically designed to help you communicate more effectively by email.

Apply the OABC model--be sure to state the purpose up front.

Be considerate--avoid broadcasting messages to people who don't need them.

Attach long documents--use the email message as a cover note telling readers the purpose of attached documents and why they are receiving them.

Keep messages short--use concise and clear language.

Be specific--tell readers what action you want them to take.

Proof your message--use spell-check before you click send.

Strategy 9. Read to become a better writer

"The key to a correct style is to write--not as the grammarians say you must, but as writers you admire actually do," says Trimble. People eager to improve their writing skills will read critically, looking for what works and what doesn't, and try to imitate the positive in their own writing.

"In order to write better, you need to read better," says Thompson. "Read the best users of the language, like Jefferson and Lincoln, as well as contemporary authors." Remember that what you read often finds its way into your writing and speech.

Strategy 10. Make writing a hobby

Writing, like most skills, requires practice. "Write even when you don't have to write," advises Thompson. "When someone needs to come up with an initial draft of a document, put your hand up and say 'I'll take a first shot at this.' Anyone can edit someone else's work; the hero is the individual who will write a first draft."

"If for some reason you feel that your communication skills are lacking, look for opportunities to continue improving... make writing a hobby," says Gary Baughman, Marriott School alumnus and retired president and CEO of Fisher-Price, Inc.

Writing enhances skills and promotes ideas. Thompson concludes, "The person who puts ideas in writing is generally the person's whose ideas tend to hold the greatest weight."

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