



Save time

The Art of Business Writing

Richard Skinulis

Written communication is a major blind spot for many business people. They often think it's either not important, or they believe it to be so esoteric they couldn't possibly do it themselves and must therefore hire a highly skilled (and expensive) professional.

The truth is, written communication *is* vitally important, because—like your appearance—it is often the first impression potential clients get of you. But more than that, being able to write a decent letter, inquiry or even a newsletter article is something everyone can and should learn how to do.

Let's start with the mistakes. The biggest one is overwriting. Novices often let their writing become too complex, elaborate or stodgy. If you can talk about your product or service intelligently, you can write about it. Try writing it the way you would say it, minus the "ums" and "ahs". Avoid big words with a lot of syllables unless they are important to the reader. What will help you do this quickly and expertly is organization.

"Often people aren't clear about what they want to say, who they want to say it to and what they want them to do about it," says Pat Morden who, with her husband Max, runs [Morden Communications Inc.](#) Based in London, Ontario, the company teaches business people how to write.

Morden says they stress using clear language, being positive in tone and direct with your message. If you want someone to call for an estimate, tell them that. If you aren't happy with their service, tell them you aren't in plain language, and then tell them what you expect them to do about it (apologize, give you a discount, speak to their staff, etc.).

Rewrite

All professional writers know that good writing involves a lot of rewriting. Go back over your first draft and read it out loud to yourself and to others. Keep improving it until it all makes good sense. Try to rewrite your work at least three times. Take out all the words that aren't necessary. For example, starting a sentence with the phrase "I believe" is a waste. If you didn't believe it, you wouldn't be writing it! This will not only streamline your writing but will also give it more impact.

Use the active voice

What sounds more impressive?

"The program will sell more widgets" or "We have developed a program that will sell more widgets".

Avoid Jargon

Jargon is the shorthand people in the same profession or circle use with each other. It's like a secret language that only the initiates understand. This is fine when you are talking to those in the know, but jargon can be a big turnoff for anyone who doesn't know what the words mean. It's OK for one engineer to use the word "specs" when talking to another engineer, meaning the word specification, or for someone to use a commonly known acronym. But putting it into a direct mail piece risks alienating the general public. Have someone representing your target group proofread your writing to ferret out jargon.

Here are some of Morden's tips for good business writing:

Organize for clarity

- Put one thought in every paragraph
- Tell the most important information first
- Use bullet lists when you can
- Use descriptive subheads to break up a long document

Write like you talk, only better

- Get to the point
- In most cases, keep the tone informal and use contractions
- Be direct and brief

Keep it simple

- Choose short, familiar words whenever you can
- Keep sentences short
- Use concrete, precise words instead of abstract, vague ones
- Use as little punctuation as possible
- Keep adjectives and adverbs to a minimum

Don't just present your ideas: SELL them

- Sell the benefits
- Be positive and friendly
- Keep your reader's perspective in mind
- Avoid sexist language

Be your own toughest critic

- Read it aloud
- Experiment with different ways of writing awkward sentences
- Check for commonly misused words and phrases. For example, the word "it's" is the contraction of "it is". *When you take out the apostrophe (its), you are using the possessive (as in, Virtue is its own reward).* To decide which is right in your sentence, read it out loud, substituting "it is". If it works, you'll want to use it's.

Finally, get yourself at least one good style guide such as Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, or the *Globe & Mail Style Guide*. They contain all the rules and common usage needed for good writing. And then of course there is spelling and grammar. Nothing, absolutely *nothing*, detracts from your message and makes you look unprofessional like misspelled words. Fortunately with today's spell checking and grammar software, there is no excuse for not writing clear, hard-hitting business copy, even if you have to get your secretary do it.

About the Author: Richard Skinulis is a Toronto-based freelance writer.

Planning a meeting or a convention ?



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