

Better business writing: critical *and* attainable

By Dan O'Sullivan

How well does your company communicate with its customers and the public? The answer depends largely on the quality of your writing.

Unfortunately, good business writing is in serious danger of extinction. Many would argue, in fact, that this skill has already gone the way of the dodo bird.

Gerald Powers has taught corporate writing seminars for 25 years. Here's how he describes the quality of business writing today: "Terrible. Poor. Lousy. Too verbose. Too long to get to the point. Prose that's cold and unfriendly."

Those were some of his kinder words.

The fact is, any time you write something for public consumption—whether it's a sales letter, a reply to a customer complaint or a press release going out to a dozen newspapers—you're putting your company's reputation on the line. Needless to say, subpar writing won't help your standing.

"[Poor writing] isn't the only indicator of whether I'd do business with a company," said Bob Cipriani, president of Fidelity Communications in Everett, Mass. "But it does set a tone that if they pay this little attention to their writing, what kind of attention will they pay to my business?"

Use it or lose it

As a business owner or executive, you bring a great deal of business experience to your role. You probably studied business in college or graduate school, then learned a few things during your climb up the company ladder.

No doubt about it; you know business.

But have you kept your writing skills sharp over the years? Unless you're in a writing-intensive field such as journalism, you probably haven't received much feedback since high school or college—if at all.

Like any skill, the ability to write deteriorates when not used. The resulting atrophy can produce ugly results.

"I'm always surprised at how bad people are at writing," said Doug Skillins, president of Birch Hill Technology Group in Swampscott, Mass. "I even come across people at the senior levels who can't string three words together coherently."

Luckily, few people are a lost cause when it comes to writing. And you don't have to be a professional writer to understand some basic principles that will help you get your message across in all your written communications.

Put a priority on audience and organization

The first question to ask before writing anything is, "Who's my audience?" All subsequent writing should spring from this basic inquiry, along with questions such as these:

- What information does my audience need?
- How can I give my audience this information in an easily digestible form?
- What motivates my audience to action?

How you answer these questions should have a major impact on how and what you write. For example, suppose your audience for a letter consists largely of fellow printers. The tone you take, the jargon you use and the information you include would be far different than if you were writing to your customers.

Once you've identified your audience, take the time to organize your thoughts. For example, depending on the complexity of the piece, sketching out a brief outline can be a big help.

Given the daily time pressures of business, you might not think you have the luxury to construct an outline. However, it's worth a few extra minutes to avoid criticism such as this:

"A lot of business writing is a stream of consciousness rather than a well-organized piece of thought that tells me what the topic is, discusses the topic, and has a concluding paragraph to sum it all up," said Rick Sands, president of Sands Custom Graphics in Boston. "I'm appalled by what I see most of the time."

Besides, creating an outline saves a lot of time in the long run. Once your thoughts are organized, the process of writing becomes much easier and faster. Not to mention that you'll end up with a better final product.

A simple rule

If you're looking for one rule to live by in all your writing, it's this: Write simply.

A first step is to *use short words that people understand*. Many writers tend to use longer words in the hope that these words will make their writing seem more impressive. Wrong.

The reality is that long words that send readers scurrying for their dictionaries impede understanding. You're much better off using short, direct words. So don't write "acknowledgement" when you mean "reply," "implement" instead of "do," or "deliberate" rather than "think."

As George Orwell, a keen observer of the English language (and author of *1984*) once wrote, "Never use a long word where a short one will do."

Next, *write short sentences and short paragraphs*. Sentences with 30 or more words are hard to follow. The same goes for paragraphs that drag on and on down the page.

Many writers are guilty of trying to stuff too much into every sentence. Rather than ending a sentence, they stick in a conjunction (e.g., "and" or "but") and keep rolling merrily along.

A good rule of thumb is to keep sentences to an average of about 15 words. So bear in mind this suggestion: "The period is your friend. Use it often."

As for paragraphs, don't be afraid to tap the "Enter" button on your keyboard. Limit each paragraph to one brief topic. Once you've addressed that topic, move on to the next paragraph and a new topic.

Finally, *rid your writing of clutter*. Clutter can take many forms, from unnecessary words to empty industry jargon and pointless meandering.

"In a lot of business writing, I see a lack of precision as well as the thought that longer is better," said Bob Puffer, vice president of manufacturing and operations at Coriolis Networks in Boxborough, Mass. "Most of this could be reduced 30 percent through basic editing."

The danger of clutter is that it buries your points under mounds of written garbage.

"I get a lot of writing from people who don't get right to the point," said Peter Soule, director of manufacturing at ASE Americas in Billerica, Mass. "As a manager, I don't have the time to weed through a lot of things. I want information boiled down so I can make my decisions."

At the very least, writing simply will help readers understand what you're trying to say. That alone will put you ahead of most business writers.

The dangerous allure of that "Send" button

The average business environment doesn't exactly encourage careful writing. Daily time pressures are one factor. Another is the growth of email. After all, who wants to take the time to achieve writing perfection when you can just hit that tantalizing "Send" button?

Still, it's important to always keep in mind two critical elements of writing—editing and rewriting.

"I'm unusual in that I spend time writing email and actually edit it before I send it," said Puffer. "But I don't see many emails that look like they've been edited. People just aren't taking the time."

"Taking the time" means carefully reviewing your writing for errors—spelling, grammatical and otherwise. And remember; your spellcheck won't catch everything. For instance, it won't point out that you wrote "lead" when you meant to write "led."

Though some co-workers may question your sanity, also try reading your writing aloud. This practice will help you catch awkward phrases, incorrect words and other shortcomings in your work.

Meanwhile, always set aside some time for rewriting. After all, your first draft should never be your last draft. The process of rewriting forces you to refine your message and make your points more clearly.

"Anything that your name goes on should be rewritten," said Powers.

Exercise your power

Understanding your audience. Organizing your thoughts. Writing simply. Editing and rewriting: These may seem like obvious recommendations.

Actually, they are obvious. However, many business writers don't incorporate these principles on a regular basis.

As an owner or executive, you have the power to make sure your company meets these standards. Good written communication, after all, is just one more way to stay ahead of your competition.

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