

# 36 Tips to...

## Punch Up Your Writing

- Email
- Social Media
- Articles
- Presentations
- Case studies
- Ads

“Communication cultures are created—not wished into existence. Great communicators model the masters, develop the strategies, practice the techniques, and measure the results.”

—*Dianna Booher*



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## Business Writing: Emails, Presentations, Social Media

1. Think newspaper headlines when you write a subject line for your email.
2. Put the action you want in your subject line.
3. Make your bottom-line message your opening line in an email. Summarize your point, and then circle back to add necessary elaboration.
4. Forget the warm-up drills—repetition of discussions and agreements reached in the past. With such, you're training readers to skip the first part of your documents as redundant.
5. Ask yourself how your readers will use your information. That will tell you whether you should include the bulk of the message in the email, attach it so your readers can distribute it or save it for later reference, or phone to discuss the matter.
6. Refer to past documents or meetings by topic—not just by date alone—to jog people's memory.
7. Change the subject line on an email thread when the subject changes. Otherwise, you may have end up saving an email that has gone back and forth 10 times with a subject that becomes buried in the middle of the exchange.
8. Prefer active voice to passive voice. (Passive: The decision was made to terminate the contract. Active: The project team decided to terminate the contract.)
9. When setting off items in a formal list, make the list parallel: All should be sentences, or only phrases, or only words. If the listed items are words, for example, they should "match." That is, they should all be either nouns, or verbs, or adjectives.
10. Delete little-word padding that obscures key ideas. Examples: *a lot of, many factors in, for your use in, at that point in time, at such time as, in the amount of, red in color, oblong in shape, grouped together, continue on, in my own personal experience.*
11. To show possession, make the word either singular or plural. Then add the apostrophe and –s to show possession. If the word already ends in –s in its plural form, you do not need to add the second –s unless you pronounce an extra syllable. Just add an apostrophe to show possession.

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12. Remember that *it's* is a contraction that means *it is*. *Its* shows ownership (like *his, her, theirs, ours*).
13. Master the semicolon. Its most common use is to separate equal things: equal items in a series or equal clauses. Example: *Frank dislikes working with that client; he's going to ask to be reassigned next week.* You could use a period instead of the semicolon, but when the two ideas are closely related, a semicolon shows the close relationship.
14. Master the colon. It throws attention forward to what follows. Its most common use is to set off a formal list. It cannot follow a verb; the clause before the colon must be complete and stand alone. (Wrong: *My benefit package includes: insurance, company car, personal phone, and travel allowance.*) Notice correct colon uses in items 9, 10, and 13 of this list.
15. Avoid running two sentences together. Punctuate accurately. Punctuation marks convey meaning.
16. Pay attention to show how your document looks on the page. To help readers skim, create eye appeal with short paragraphs, adequate white space, bulleted lists, informative headings, and bolding.
17. Make your salutation and closing match the email's content, your purpose for the document, the tone of the document, and your relationship with the readers.

## Technical Writing: Articles, Presentations

18. Compensate for technical words and concepts by writing shorter sentences.
19. Use the non-technical word if there's an equivalent substitute.
20. Make words plural by using the English, not foreign, rules of pluralization.
21. Use etcetera only when you've established a definite pattern: *"He assigned groups 3, 6, 9, 12, etcetera to use the class laptops on odd days. Groups 1-2, 4-5, 7-8, 10-11, etcetera to use the class laptops on even days."* (Wrong: *Bring your notes, etc. to the meeting.*)
22. Use transitions so that your readers don't get lost along the way.
23. Use 6X6 as a typical rule-of-thumb for text on slides: That is, use no more than 6 words across and no more than 6 lines of text down on a slide.
24. Select a font style and size that makes a task look simple rather than complex. For example, researchers found that people who reviewed a procedure written in Mistral or Brush font estimated that the task would take much longer than the same procedure written in Arial.

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## Copywriting: Ads, Articles

25. Find a way to use the most persuasive words in the language: *you, because, free, instantly, new, money, sales, power, benefits, results, easy, proven, guarantee, safety, healthy, bargain, breakthrough, compare, convenience, reliable, common sense, stable, predictability, insight, performance-driven, specialist.*
26. If a phrase rolls off your tongue easily without thought, don't use it. Assume it's a cliché. Replace it with original wording.
27. Vary sentence patterns and length to avoid monotony. To grab attention, follow a lengthy sentence with a short one.
28. Make intentional use of keywords. Almost all copy today is searchable. Don't overuse the keywords so that the copy doesn't read smoothly to human ears, but start writing with an intentional awareness of your word choices.
29. Focus on advantages. Writing about features and benefits does not take your reader far enough. Interpret the feature and benefit statement(s) with this prompter: "So what this means to you is that ..."
30. Never overlook the importance of whitespace. Blank space makes your words pop.
31. Understand the value of climactic sentences. If you have two ideas in a sentence, position them so that the key idea comes in the most important spot—at the end. Example: "You get two for the price of one if you buy today!" (emphasizes buying today) "If you buy today, you get two for the price of one!" (emphasizes low price)
32. Write for an audience of one. Wherever possible, engage readers by writing directly to them. Using the third-person "they" or "one" is like eating finger foods while wearing rubber gloves.

## Case Studies, Articles, Books

33. Trust your writing. Only amateurs have their characters continue to rethink unresolved plot lines, key decisions, and other "hooks" to maintain reader interest. Trust your reader's ability to have read what you wrote, understand its significance, and retain it for the future. Continuing to repeat these issues is the mark of an unsure writer.
34. Make a detail audition its way into the document. Does the additional detail create mood, add to the plot, or reveal character? If not, leave it out.
35. Use "said" in 99 out of 100 dialogue lines. Fancier words (responded, spat, roared, yelled, hissed, begged) distract from the actual dialogue. If you find that you need a more descriptive tag than "said," beef up the actual dialogue.
36. Speed up a scene by omitting the tags altogether once you've established who's talking.

Dianna Booher, a communication strategist, is the author of 46 books, published in 26 languages. Her latest books include *What More Can I Say: Why Communication Fails and What To Do About It* ([www.WhatMoreCanISaythebook.com](http://www.WhatMoreCanISaythebook.com)); *Creating Personal Presence: Look, Talk, Think, and Act Like a Leader* ([www.creatingpersonalpresence.com](http://www.creatingpersonalpresence.com)); and *Communicate With Confidence* ([www.communicatewithconfidence.com](http://www.communicatewithconfidence.com)). She works with organizations to improve the effectiveness of their communication: oral, written, interpersonal, and enterprise-wide. *Successful Meetings* magazine has named her to its list of “21 Top Speakers for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”



@DiannaBooher

Facebook.com/DiannaBooher

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GooglePlus/DiannaBooher

YouTube.com/DiannaBooher