

134 views | Jan 16, 2020, 11:30 am

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Why People Get Business Writing Wrong -- And What to Do About It



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in When I mentioned business writing several years to a manager, he made a rather odd comment: “Our people don’t write much anymore. They primarily use email.”

Although I refrained from a smart aleck retort, I was thinking, “So what do they use email for—math?”

It would be difficult today to find any knowledge worker who doesn’t do business by email. But that doesn’t mean they get the decision or action they want with their email—or that they communicate productively.

The more specialized you are, the greater the chance that you write longer documents as well: project or status reports, feasibility studies, internal or external proposals, briefings, procedures, policy manuals, marketing materials, and the like.

If your emails and other documents are not accomplishing their purpose, consider the following reasons and aim to improve your writing:

6 Ways You May Be Getting Business Writing All Wrong

Writing as You Think



6 Ways You May Be Getting Business Writing All Wrong ICLIPART

You may be writing like you tell jokes or stories: “Once upon a time, three salespeople walked up to a gate agent at the airport. The first guy says ...” Finally, you end with the punchline and hope for a laugh.

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But unlike with jokes and stories, the purpose of a business document is not to entertain. In the workplace, you’re writing to inform, instruct, or persuade. Readers want the “punchline” upfront. They’ll likely not even understand your “beginning” until they know your “end.” So forgo the once-upon-a-time brain dump. Think first. Then write, starting with a summary of your point.

Writing as You Talk

When communication experts pass along advice to “write as you talk,” they definitely don’t mean that literally. That often repeated advice means to write in a natural, conversational style—not with the awkward, stuffy language of several decades ago.

But some people take the rule far too literally and write emails and websites that mimic a disjointed, inaccurate conversation. In a casual discussion, we don’t always use complete sentences. We repeat words and phrases. We’re redundant with details. We make grammatical errors like “just between you and I.”

When you write a business email, be conversational—but also be careful. Edit for clarity, conciseness, and grammar.

Writing From Your Own Perspective

Don’t forget negative incentives; they motivate as well as positive ones—sometimes even better: “To prevent our misrouting your invoice...” “To make sure your registration is complete....” “to make sure there are no problems when your team arrives onsite....” All such statements convey to the reader that you understand what’s important to *them*.

Informing Rather Than Persuading

Determine your purpose. Then know the difference between a fact and a reason: Telling someone that salmon contains Vitamin D is not the same as persuading them that they need to eat more salmon. What if the person already gets an ample supply of Vitamin D

Many sales and marketing professionals fail in their tasks for this one reason alone: Informing rather than interpreting facts persuasively as they apply to the client.

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Using Weak Language Diminishes Authority

Get rid of wishy-washy language: “We’ll try to ...,” “attempt to,” “possibly,” “in a best case scenario.” Be specific and concrete. Adding authority also refers to adding evidence: expert opinion, statistics, data, client cases, social proof. Rather than “saying it all yourself,” stack the deck to your advantage.

Forgetting That People Often Skim Rather Than Read

Make skimming easy. Use informative headings, bulleted or numbered lists, ample blank space, or typographical elements to call attention to key ideas or details. You may wish people would hang on your every word, but they don’t. So at least help them hang onto the important ones!

Writing is how business gets done today. Make sure your emails, reports, proposals, and studies get done right.

Dianna Booher is the bestselling author of 48 books. Her newest is Faster, Fewer, Better Emails. She helps organizations communicate clearly. Follow her at BooherResearch.com and @DiannaBooher.

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