



## WRITING & EDITING

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# 5 questions to ask before crafting your message

Mind these guidelines to write more compelling memos, sharper emails and meatier reports.

By Dianna Booher

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Chances are, you've been through training programs to improve writing or presentation skills.

And most all of them probably started with one or both of these platitudes:



Well and good. But *how* to do those things warrants a few more specifics. To drill into what audience analysis and your purpose actually entail, ask yourself these key questions:

### 1. Do I have a single reader or multiple readers?

How many people are on your distribution list? Do you have pass-on readership? Are you writing “through” several people who must approve your email, report or proposal before it goes to the reader(s)?

If you have mixed audiences, rank readers in order of importance. The most important reader gets the information first. Secondary readers must read further into the document to find information they may need.

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### 2. What’s the message of interest to my reader(s)?

How many times have you heard someone say (most often with a long sigh), “I know what I want to say; I just can’t explain it.”

That’s *not* an accurate diagnosis of the problem. The person doesn’t know what they want to say; that’s why they can’t get the words on the screen or paper. If you can’t summarize your bottom-line message in a few sentences (often one sentence will suffice), you’re not ready to write. Think longer and harder. Concisely crystallize the essence of what you want to convey.

If you need a prompt, start with, “I’m writing to tell you that…” When you finish the sentence, go back and delete the “I’m writing to tell you that” and what you have left will often work as a clear message sentence or two.

### 3. How will my reader use this information?

Will readers have to make a decision based on your details? If so, have you given all the pertinent criteria and facts? Will readers merely distribute the information to others who must act to execute your plan, form or process? If so, is the information in detachable, complete form so they don’t have to go back and forth from email to document back to email to gather tidbits? Do these people need to know the *why* and *how* of your message so they can build on your work?

### 4. How much does my reader already know about the topic?

Take care not to waste reader time by telling people what they already know. If they attended the meeting, you don’t need to recap what happened. If they were on the phone call, don’t start with, “As you already know, blah, blah, blah. That’s pointless. Instead, give them the crucial bits they don’t yet know.



- How technical are your readers?
- What's their educational background and job experience?
- How involved have they previously been in the project or initiative you're writing about?

Delete acronyms and jargon from your writing when you have multiple readers who may not define terms as you do.

## 5. How will readers react to my message?

If your email delivers a routine message simply providing information or instructions, fine. No problem reactions. In those cases, if you're clear, your readers will comply.

But what about negative reactions? Will your reader(s) be skeptical about claims, objectives or plans? Is the situation sensitive, such as proposing an unanticipated expense? Will someone lose face because of what you say? Are you giving a short deadline that will mean readers must scrap their planned schedule to complete your request or project? Will your request simply be a low priority for your busy readers?

When any of these circumstances are the case, anticipate adverse reactions and plan to overcome — or minimize — them from the start.

Let these five key questions guide your thinking so that what you put on the page is clear, concise, complete and compelling.

*Dianna Booher is an author, executive coach and speaker. Read more of her ideas here.*

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