

Tips on Business Writing

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In most of my teaching, I'm preparing students to be leaders in corporations, non-profits, or government agencies. Good leaders are almost always good communicators. They can present complicated information effectively and they are usually quite persuasive. They are often good public speakers and also succinct and articulate in written communications.

All of the arts of persuasion – also known as rhetoric – and communication are easily teachable. Yet we often ignore these skills in our curricula. As a result, I believe that many of our students are not as successful as they could be. Additionally, businesses must often teach remedial communication skills.

In my career – almost 30 years in the software industry – I encountered this problem frequently. I also taught courses on rhetoric and public speaking. My companies sought to gain a sustainable advantage simply by communicating more effectively than our competitors. I've now built a website:

www.traviswhitecommunications.com

dedicated to teaching persuasive communication skills. The website – which is free -- focuses primarily on persuasion in public speaking. This document is the beginning of my effort to teach similar skills in written communications.

Tips

Be competitive – most business documents seek to persuade the reader to do something. Before writing anything, clearly identify what it is that you want the reader to do. Then aim your writing at that objective. Remember that other people will be trying to persuade the reader to do something else. They're your competition. If your writing is clearer, stronger, more memorable, and more persuasive than theirs, you'll probably win. If not, you'll probably lose.

Don't assume that good ideas always win – I've met any number of engineers who believe that superior products always win. There's no need to "market" them. Unfortunately, that's not true. We can all think of "superior" products that have lost out to "inferior" products. Even the best ideas need to be explained clearly and coherently. Remember that beauty is in the eye of the beholder and the beholder may not understand just how clever the designer is without a good explanation.

Good writing comes from good thinking – before you begin writing, jot down the key ideas that you want your reader to absorb. People can usually absorb three ideas but not many more. If you have many ideas, cluster them together in three major categories. Then sort out the order to present them. Generally, you want to present your strongest argument first, your weakest argument second, and your second most effective argument third. Why not present them in one-two-three order? Because readers are most likely to remember your first and last points. They're most likely to forget your middle point.

Give your reader something to remember – people forget what they read. Help them remember your points by giving them memory hooks. Alliteration often helps. So do rhymes. So does repetition (within limits). Or you can create sound bites – brief, memorable phrases that you may want to repeat. You can also create memorable acronyms. For instance, if your three points are: 1) *Hire* more people; 2) *Invest* in their success; 3) *Train* them effectively – your acronym is a simple and memorable word: HIT.

Be conversational – successful business writers often write like they talk. When you talk with a friend, you don't use pretentious jargon, obscure acronyms, or convoluted sentence structures. Don't use them in your writing either.

Get to the point quickly – people who read your business documents are often very busy. Don't waste their time by "clearing your throat" with a lengthy introduction. Get to the point and state your conclusion near the beginning of the document.

Anticipate scanning – because they are busy, many of your readers will scan your document rather than reading it word for word. The easiest way to scan is to read only the first sentence of every paragraph. Make sure that every paragraph has a topic sentence that clearly conveys the key idea of the paragraph. Make sure that every paragraph has one – and only one – idea.

To be is not to be – the verb *to be* is not your friend. It often makes sentences passive and needlessly complicated. When you've completed your near-final draft, use your word processing software to search for every occurrence of the verb *to be* – *is, are, was, were, etc.* When you find one, see if you can rewrite the sentence without it. You can't get them all but your writing will become simpler, stronger, and clearer.

Bullets help – you can use bullet points to guide the reader's eye to the most important elements of your document. Bullets can also help you summarize – and make memorable – your key passages. Some management consulting firms take this to an extreme. Their final deliverable is not a written document but a Power Point slide deck – nothing but bullets.

Don't use long words where short words will do – we're often tempted to use long, "sophisticated" words because they make us appear smarter. Actually, the reverse is true. When you use overly complicated words, your reader may conclude: 1) you're faking it; 2) you're trying to pull a fast one; 3) you're not nearly as smart as you think you are; 4) you're not trustworthy. Write simply and clearly. Here's an exercise: write your document using only one-syllable words. Then go back and substitute multi-syllable words *only* if they're more efficient.

Short is better than long – it's not just words; short is better than long when it comes to sentences, paragraphs, sections and, indeed, your entire document. If you shorten your document, you ensure that the most important points don't get tangled up in trivia. They rise to the top. You also shift the odds in the competition to influence the reader. If your document is brief and to-the-point while your competitor's document is long and boring, you're more likely to win.

You think better in longhand – there’s something about writing longhand that works your brain differently. You write shorter, more concise sentences. You get to the point more quickly. Write your outline – or even your entire first draft – in longhand. Don’t start word processing until you have to. This is especially true with PowerPoint presentations. Always start with yellow sticky notes – one note per slide. Write the purpose of the slide on the sticky note, and then arrange them on a wall to establish the order. When you create the slides, limit the text to what you’ve written on the yellow sticky note. That’s about the right amount for a slide.

Involve the reader – in some ways, business writing is like marketing writing. You want the reader to feel, “It’s about me!” It’s not about the writer. It’s not even about the topic of the document. It’s about the *impact* of the topic on the reader. If you want to sell a watch, don’t write about the watch. Write about how the reader will feel while wearing the watch. Whenever possible, make the reader feel that the topic you’re writing about personally involves him or her. Among other things, this means you should use the second person (*you, your*) and minimize use of the first person. If you have to use first person, use the plural form (*we, us, our*) rather than the singular form (*I, me, mine*). The plural form involves the reader; the singular form doesn’t.

Always proofread – word processing software packages have auto-correct features that can help you a lot. Unfortunately, they can also “correct” errors in unforeseen ways that can garble your message or embarrass you personally. Some recent examples from student papers: “Starbucks is opening a new sore every week.” “3D printers use a spay nozzle to shape the material.”

Some tips of proofreading:

- Change fonts – when you proofread your own material, your eye sees what it expects to see rather than what’s actually on the page. By changing the font throughout the document, your eye will see the text in a new way.
- Read it out loud – this slows you down and makes you pay attention to each word – especially if you read it to another person.
- Read it backwards – like reading aloud, this makes you pay attention to each word.

Common Mistakes

Here are some of the most common mistakes I've seen in business documents and student papers. They make your argument less persuasive. The reader may think, "If you can't get the grammar right, what can you get right?"

- *It's* versus *its* – they sound the same but they mean different things. *It's* is the contraction of *it is*. *Its* is the possessive form of *it* – just like *his* is the possessive form of *he*. Here's the correct way to use both:

My car is very powerful. Its engine produces 500 horsepower. It's going to get me in trouble.

- *That* versus *which* – *that* introduces a restrictive clause; it restricts or narrows the meaning of the sentence and is essential to understanding the sentence. *Which* is not restrictive; it merely adds additional information. If you remove the clause following *which*, the sentence still makes sense.

We only sell cars that are more than 30 years old.

I like furniture from the 19th century, which makes me a bit unusual.

- *In order to* – it's really not necessary. The following two sentences mean exactly the same thing. The second sentence is simpler, which makes it better. After all, simpler is better.

In order to understand physics, you need to study math

To understand physics, you need to study math.

- *There, their, they're* – you know the difference but your word processor doesn't. If you mean to type *there* but actually type *ther*, your auto-correct feature may change it to *their*. Be sure to search for these as you proofread. The same goes for *your* and *you're*.

My friends want to move the box over there. I think they're going to change their minds when they discover how heavy it is.

- Misuse of *myself* – I often read sentences like this:

Please send the e-mail to Tom and myself.

Now take “to Tom” out of the sentence. Would you say:

Please send the e-mail to myself.

When you remove “to Tom”, it’s obvious that *myself* is the wrong word choice.

Please send the e-mail to me.

Please send the e-mail to Tom and me.

- Wrong object in a comparative – these sentences may sound right, but they’re not:

He is taller than me.

They have more money than us.

They’re wrong because the last word actually starts a new clause that completes the meaning:

He is taller than I am.

They have more money than we do.

We often truncate the final clause because it’s understood. But the last word still serves to initiate the thought. Here’s the right way to do it.

He is taller than I.

They have more money than we.