

Writing: Expanding Your Sphere of Influence Through Better Business Communications

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Improving writing skills is not a difficult task. Unlike creative writing, business writing does not require talent. It merely requires you to follow a number of easy-to-learn rules, to focus on the reader and to use common sense.

The following information reviews some problems with key documents and the writing process and offers some action steps:

Letters

Common complaints: too lengthy, too complicated, pompous tone, can't figure out the action required.

Action step: Focus on what the reader wants to know and what you want the reader to know. Omit any other details. Keep paragraphs short (opening and closing lines no longer than three-four lines and nothing in the body over eight lines). For a warm tone, use the word "you" more often than "I," or we.

Your last line leaves the lasting impression. Take special care that your last sentence tells the reader what he is to do after he has read your letter.

Reports

Common complaints: too long, too much information, too technical, too difficult to read.

Action items: Focus on what the reader needs to make a decision. If you are writing to readers with different backgrounds, chunk the information according to chronology and degree of technical difficulty. Use descriptive headings so readers will only have to read the information they require.

Use design aids to make long documents visually appealing:

- White space
- Bulleted or numbered lists
- Short paragraphs
- Talking heads and sub-heads

Proposals

Common complaints: off target, too commercialized, emphasis is on the service/product, lists features not benefits.

Action items: Identify receiver's problem/concern and his goals. Focus on how your product/service will assist the receiver in meeting his objectives. Don't assume reader will instantly understand how your service/product will meet his needs. Make a clear connection.

E-mails

Common complaints: too many, lack of etiquette, too demanding, poor tone, spelling and grammar errors.

Action items: Only send e-mails to people when necessary. Don't send copies to disinterested people. Don't be chatty. Organize e-mails in a descending pyramid fashion. The first paragraph should tell the reader why he must read the message. Second paragraph contains a key point. The following paragraphs provide support. The final paragraph reiterates what the reader should do next.

Don't issue demands unless you are the chief "honcho." You are more likely to get a quick response, if you tell people why you need them to take action. Be clear on the action you want the receiver to take. Remember he is not a mind reader.

Use upper and lower case and correct punctuation. It is easier for people to get your message when it is written in the same manner as all their other correspondence.

Pay attention to grammar and spelling. Incorrect use of the English language detracts from your message. Reader's thoughts stray from your ideas to thinking about the correct word.

Style

Common complaints: outdated style, lack of clarity.

Action items:

1. Write the way you speak - assuming you speak in a grammatically correct fashion.
2. Never send your reader to the dictionary.
3. Keep your average sentence length to 15 words.
4. Don't write a sentence requiring more than 4 pieces of punctuation.
5. Use active voice sentences, when ever possible.
6. Use bulleted or numbered lists.
7. Keep paragraphs short.
8. Use linking words, such as in addition, however, first, to connect your thoughts and to deliver your ideas in a smooth, easy-to-follow fashion.
9. Be courteous.

Grammar

Common complaints: wrong punctuation, subjects and verbs don't agree, misused or misspelled words.

Action items: Grammar rules change with the times. Review a recently published grammar book to ensure your knowledge is up to date. If you have been out of school more than five years, chances are it isn't.

If you want to assess your grammar abilities, try the grammar quiz on the J Watson & Associates' site. The answers and the explanations are also there.

www.canlink.com/jwatson

Good luck and good writing!

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