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careerwise

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A weekly guide to developing essential skills and where to find key resources

How to... produce powerful business writing

By **Scott Beagrie**

Why is it important?

In an age of e-mail and text messaging, where the emphasis is on speed and brevity in workplace communications, the importance of good English and well-crafted sentences is frequently underestimated. But being able to write effectively is a valuable skill in the business world, as a well-written proposal, memo, performance appraisal or business plan can make the difference between a desired outcome, and your communication ending up in the wastebasket.

With standards of grammar plummeting, good writing skills mark you out as a more competent, mature and confident individual, and they will also help you deliver that killer covering letter when it comes to making your next career move. Top quality writing may not come naturally to everyone but its basic principles can be mastered.

Where do I start?

Every communication is different and will have a different aim. Plan what you want it to say and achieve. Consider the target audience and decide on the medium: paper, e-mail or both. How you present it will also have a bearing on its structure. Is it a business plan or proposal you will talk someone through, or a report they'll read by themselves in their own time? Set aside plenty of time

to write it and include at least one revision. Many documents come across as sloppily written simply because the author has rushed them.

Know your audience

This is crucial in order to get the content, style and tone right. "The choice of language is particularly important to get the reaction you are seeking," says David Scarfe, senior training consultant at learning solutions provider, Tack International.

"You don't want to turn your audience off by being too technical, complex or patronising," Scarfe advises writers to put themselves in their audiences' shoes and ask the following questions:

- How much knowledge are they likely to have on the subject area?
- What terms might need explaining?
- How much convincing will they need?
- What might their objections be?
- Have you communicated with them before?
- How formal or informal is the relationship?

Once answered, you can then decide on the tone (informal, formal) and plan your content.

Content is king

Compile all relevant facts and information needed to write the communication and roughly sketch out what you want to say and the order you want to say it in. Make



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sure you are not wasting people's time with over-elaborate details or by including unnecessary information.

The written communication

Explain what your document is about in the first paragraph or with a brief separate synopsis. Always make your first line count to catch the reader's interest, use plain English and keep sentences concise. Avoid jargon, clichés or humour, as it often backfires. Be accurate, distinguish opinion from fact, and understand how couching a point in positive or negative terms might impact your message. Use bullet points for lists or summaries in long documents and wind up with a short conclusion or summary. Make sure you tell the recipient what happens next – do they need to reply, will you call them or is a follow-up meeting scheduled?

Re-read and appraise

It is vital to read and appraise the document before it goes anywhere, but set it aside for a few hours or preferably overnight so you're looking at it with fresh eyes. Does it make sense? Does it read well

and follow a logical sequence?

Does it meet your brief and convey the right message? Does it sound pompous or patronising? Will the recipient understand it? If possible, seek constructive feedback from a trustworthy colleague. Check the spelling, punctuation and grammar.

Remember the spoken word

While good writing skills are important, there will still be times when the spoken word is more appropriate, but if the message is important the above guidance should still apply.

"Technology makes it easy to indiscriminately transmit copies of messages to a wider audience than necessary, placing an even greater burden on our limited time. As a result, we speak to colleagues less, while messages can unintentionally come across as blunt or confusing – all of which leads to a breakdown of good relations," says Scarfe. "The route to powerful communications, written or verbal, is ultimately down to consideration of the objectives, audience and the medium."

Where can I get more info?

BOOKS

- *Business Writing Makeovers*, Hawley Roddick, Adams Media Corporation, £7.22, ISBN 1580627684
- *How to Say It: Choice Words, Phrases, Sentences and Paragraphs for Every Situation*, Rosalie Maggio, Prentice Hall, £8.92, ISBN 0735202346
- *Eats, Shoots & Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation*, Lynne Truss, Profile Books, £9.99, ISBN 1861976127

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EXPERT'S VIEW DAVID SCARFE ON PRODUCING GOOD BUSINESS WRITING



David Scarfe is a senior training consultant at learning solutions provider Tack International

Why are good business writing skills essential to HR?

As the HR profession seeks to raise its profile at a strategic level in business, it is competing with all other business functions to achieve recognition of the importance of its role. This requires well-presented business and budget plans to demonstrate how value is being added. HR also interacts

with all functions and needs to communicate effectively with different audiences. Excellent verbal and written communication skills are essential, especially given the legal responsibility within the role, which calls for both a precise and plain use of language.

Is too little importance attached to the quality of business writing?

There has been less attention attached to the quality of business writing than it deserves and interest in it seems to go in and out of vogue. The basics are not given high priority in schools, and when students move into their first

business roles, their managers do not take the time to educate their people in business writing. As a consequence, we are seeing an increase in demand for improved written communications within our training programmes. A growing number of our customers are also introducing a company-wide policy for handling communications. They see this as a route to improving overall effectiveness and to re-enforce their brand so they stand out from their competitors.

What shortcuts can you recommend?

There are no magic shortcuts.