

## Ten Commandments of Business Writing

### **Short Sentences**

The philosopher Pascal once apologized for writing a long letter; if he'd had more time, he said, he'd have written a shorter one. Mark Twain said he didn't write *Metropolis* because he earned the same amount for writing *City*.

### **Short Paragraphs**

One idea, one paragraph.

### **Active Voice**

Not "the dog was walked by the girl."

### **Necessary Words Only**

"Advance planning" equals "planning." Put the news in the document's first paragraph. Don't overload the reader with adjectives and adverbs. When it's done, cut it 10%.

### **Simple Words, Action Verbs, Concrete Nouns**

"It behooves the writer to avoid archaic expressions" may be a true statement, but it's a weak sentence. Use the S-V-O (subject-verb-object) as the basis of any sentence. When jargon tempts you, remember that your audience doesn't have the same vocabulary that you do.

### **Consistent Tenses**

When you change tenses, have a reason. Don't be afraid of the present tense.

### **Avoid Clichés Like the Plague**

Enough said.

### **Parallelism Creates Power**

Organize thoughts in parallel and use parallel construction to state them: "Our company locates oil deposits, refines petroleum products, and sells gasoline."

### **Show, Don't Tell**

Follow a generalization with an example. When explaining a complex process, use everyday analogies.

### **Anecdotes and Quotations**

Use plenty. Don't be afraid to use them.

### **And remember:**

A truly good writer generally is always careful to practically eliminate the too-frequent use of useful adverbs and pertinent adjectives.

Do not use a foreign term when there is an adequate English *quid pro quo*.

Mixed metaphors are a pain in the neck and ought to be thrown out the window.

## **Seven Deadly Sins of Business Writing**

### **Stacked Modifiers**

The business has a distinguished track record in developing specialized and targeted market-value products.

### **Odd Punctuation**

Food donations are being gathered at; Smith's Café, city hall and the high school.

### **Grammar That Departs From Standard English**

As the 34<sup>th</sup> largest U.S. exporter, trade is critically important to our company.

### **Interior Jargon**

We have responded by making changes in key operating parameters of the process which will provide greater assurance of a safe, stable, high-quality product. To further ensure process capability, we recently received approval for a major upgrade of our process instrumentation which will allow us to better control our new operating parameters.

### **Overcapitalization**

Our Machinery and Equipment businesses capitalized on their growing Leadership positions and market conditions to turn in an outstanding performance in the third quarter.

### **Passive Voice**

Food and fibers in Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa are protected by a range of products that are effective against insects, weeds, and other pests.

### **Verbs Created From Nouns, and Vice Versa**

Special working teams were established to impact the production process.

## Nominal Writing in Business

Most writing that occurs in corporations is passive-nominal. By that, we mean that it avoids the active voice and depends both on verbs created from nouns and nouns created from verbs. Said the man in the New Yorker cartoon: "Anne, my life was nothing until you impacted it."

At the University of Wisconsin, a researcher tested three modes of writing on 266 students. His hypotheses were that nominal writing was slower reading, that comprehension would fall, that readers would be more interested in active writing, and that the active voice would be easier to read.

### Samples of the Writing Styles Used:

#### Active

Researchers have found that more and more Americans are running to achieve physical fitness.

#### Passive

It has been found by researchers that more and more Americans are running to achieve physical fitness.

#### Nominal

The finding of researchers is that more and more Americans are running for the achievement of physical fitness.

#### Results:

- Reading speed was slower for passive and nominal passages. Nominal was the slowest.
- Comprehension didn't fall. That may have been because the sample was only college students accustomed to reading all three styles.
- Active writing was more interesting.
- No style seemed easier to read, although students showed some preference for active voice.

The University of Wisconsin researcher's conclusion: "Researchers may prefer the nominal style because it is easy to write, impersonal, aloof, and less definite. Some believe it indicates verbal sophistication. Nevertheless, no matter how much and why we value it, the nominal style is a poor choice for effective communication."

#### Reminder:

Most business writing is passive-nominal. Such a style is denser than any example used in this study. If we were to test that style, we could use this:

It has been found by researchers that more and more Americans are running for the achievement of physical fitness.

Tough on the reader, right?

## Personality Choices in Business Writing

(from Marcia Yudkin, *Persuading on Paper*, Infinity Publishing, 2001)

### Friendly or Aloof

- "I'm looking forward to our business arrangement. It's clearly going to be a successful adventure. It's always a pleasure to work with new faces." (Friendly)
- "This should be an acceptable business arrangement. I suspect it will work out. New faces can be a benefit to a company." (Aloof)

### Precise or General

- "Please provide us with the most recent sales accounts, including past successes as well as projections for the next six months." (Precise)
- "Please bring us any pertinent documents that might help us figure out what to consider next." (General)

### Timid-Assertive or Aggressive

- "I'm hoping that you won't have a problem with what our company expects from you." (Timid-Assertive)
- "We expect that you will follow rigorously all of our company policies." (Aggressive)

### Serious or Light-Humorous

- "Though we have spent long, tedious hours at this conference table, we must keep ourselves focused on the issue at hand." (Serious)
- "Though we have spent long, tedious hours at this conference table, we must we keep ourselves focused not just on our hands, but also on the issue at hand." (Light-Humorous)

### Chatty or All-Business

- "As my mother used to say before she began canning her summer preserves, 'It ain't gonna get done all by itself.'" (Chatty)
- "We must get started." (All-Business)

### Commanding or Beckoning

- "Perkins, pitch the ad to us." (Commanding)
- "Perkins, would you please pitch the ad to us?" (Beckoning)

### Veiled or Candid

- "Sometimes our less than successful moments can be addressed by asking ourselves whether or not we have looked inwardly enough." (Veiled)
- "The Woodland account was lost because you didn't cover all of your bases." (Candid)

### Folksy or Sophisticated

- "The early bird gets the worm. Remember that when you begin to scout out prospective clients." (Folksy)
- "In order to gather more abundant profits, one should trust that diligent management of prospective accounts is akin to careful husbandry." (Sophisticated)

## Persuasive Business Writing

### **Purely Factual (no sell):**

This approach merely states basic information without any particular tone.

- Charlie's Nightspot, 1 N. State St., attracts a young, style-conscious clientele.

### **Slanted (soft sell):**

This approach attempts subtlety by making reference to a significant connection designed to boost indirectly the reputation of the establishment.

- Charlie studied with Chef Francois, whose students include Wolfgang Puck.

### **Mildly Promotional (medium sell):**

This approach speaks directly to potential clientele by confidently stating how the establishment or product will appeal to the customer personally.

- For a meal you'll remember, call Charlie at 555-1189.

### **Strongly Promotional (hard sell):**

This approach works on two levels: 1) It suggests that the establishment will offer something unique, and 2) It nudges the potential customer into believing there is a level of urgency involved in experiencing the uniqueness which demands he or she act soon to enjoy its rewards.

- Call this weekend to reserve a special evening at Charlie's. Keep in mind that reservations typically close 48 hours in advance.

### **Hype (overkill):**

This approach simply saturates the potential customer with the glitter of the establishment. However, the extravagant claims tend to shout in one's face, risking crassness that might undermine the establishment's goals.

- You have a rare opportunity to dine in the same room with celebrities. A meal at Charlie's will leave your friends wondering: "Now, why don't I do things like that?"

## Writing A Business Memo

**STRATEGY: inform, explain, justify, persuade, sell**

**Beginning:**

State the topic and introduce a few key concepts

**Middle:**

Discuss or explain in several paragraphs

**Ending:**

Conclude, summarize, reiterate

Italian proverb: "Think much, speak little, write less."

**DO NOT:**

**Let biases damage your credibility** Systems analysts have a habit of deciding on the input to be recorded without reference to management needs.

**Attach labels or procedures in order to denigrate them** Your informants distorted the facts about the high cost of the new signage.

**Slant your writing, use opinions as facts or insinuate**

I hope we don't knuckle under to downsizing, which has affected too many large corporations. It is clear that these three suppliers violated our service guidelines. The Purchasing Section's infatuation with certain long-time suppliers makes one wonder whether we're really getting the best quality at a fair price.

**Overstate**

We have had incredible results this quarter in Latin America. Sales enjoyed a whopping increase, which is a fantastic achievement.

**Use shaky reasoning or generalizations**

Factory absenteeism on Monday, the 24th, was too high, certainly blamable on the celebrations of Super Bowl Sunday.

**Be falsely modest**

Although the Department made more than its share of mistakes last year, our modest improvement in the first quarter of this year will surprise you as it did me.

**Be sarcastic**

Of course, knowing Peterson, we can be certain that his motive is "completely altruistic."

**Talk down to readers**

Let's not forget that the word personnel is just another name for people. We must not lose sight of the fact that the business of the Human Resources Division is people.

### **Weaken your document with wrong usage or misspelling**

From her comments, I deduct that she thinks we have not been discrete in handling confidential files.

### **Use excessively wordy or verbose language to express simple notions**

Due to the carcinogenic risk apparent in abundant nicotine fumes, the administration requests that you refrain from partaking of your tobacco during the customary break for lunch (Translation: "No Smoking").

### **DO:**

#### **Think about using the parts of argument**

- **Claim:**  
a single statement advanced for the adherence of others
- **Grounds:**  
a statement about persons, conditions, events or things that says support is available to provide
- **Warrant:**  
a statement that justifies using the grounds as a basis for the claim
- **Backing:**  
support providing more data for grounds or warrant
- **Qualifier:**  
a statement that indicates the force of the argument (certainly, possibly, probably)
- **Rebuttal:**  
the basis on which a decision maker will question the claim

#### **Involve the reader**

Gain attention in the first sentence: The purpose of this report is to assess new competition - a product that could cut our sales in half.

#### **Make your structure clear**

Anything longer than half a page needs structure, and your organization should be apparent to the reader, sometimes through numbers, bullets, etc.

#### **Use white space as a tool**

#### **Stop when you're finished**

#### **End with a call to action.**

#### **Don't waste the reader's time with homily:**

I hope this answers your questions.

#### **Think about who opens the mail and sees it before it gets to the addressee**

## Using Evidence to Prove Your Point

Evidence is a term commonly used to describe the supporting material in persuasive writing. Evidence gives an objective foundation to your arguments, and makes your writing more than a mere collection of personal opinions or prejudices. Evidence includes:

- facts and figures
- examples
- narratives
- testimony
- definition

All are used to convince readers to accept the arguments and recommendations the writer is presenting.

Because you are asking your readers to take a risk when you attempt to persuade them, audiences will demand support for your assertions. Search for evidence that is relevant and timely and that comes from sources your audience will respect and accept.

### A few notes about evidence

- Have more facts and figures than you think you will need.
- Have the latest facts and figures—make sure your data is up to the minute.
- Emphasize factual examples.
- When appropriate, use powerful examples.
- Use narratives to create identification—to draw your audience into your subject and reinforce their stake in the outcome.
- Emphasize expert testimony. It carries more weight than prestige or lay testimony. Be prepared to document the qualifications of the experts you use, if they are unfamiliar to your audience.
- Use multiple sources of evidence.

Proofs are interpretations drawn from evidence that provide readers with good reasons for changing an attitude or following a course of conduct or action. Good reasons are concerned with showing an audience that something is admirable, desirable, or obligatory.

### Most importantly, audiences evaluate good reasons in terms of their:

- Relevance (do they really apply to the situation or issue at hand?);
- Consequences (what will be the result of accepting or rejecting them?); and
- Consistency (do they fit together, and do they fit with our other prior beliefs/policies?).

**Proofs that produce good reasons have been studied since the time of Aristotle. He suggested in his book *The Rhetoric*, written in the fourth century B.C., that there are three types of proof:**

- Logos—proof that emphasizes rational evidence;
- Pathos—proof based on motives and emotions; and
- Ethos—proof based on the personality, character, and reputation of the writer.

### More recent scholars have added one other form of proof:

- Mythos—proof based on the traditions, identity, and values of a group. The mythos of an organization can be an important element in persuasive business writing.

In most ethical and effective persuasive efforts, particularly in a business setting, logos usually predominates. Ethos and pathos can be important supporting players; pathos is the least used in business.

Let's take a brief look at how proof is structured—in this case, using logical evidence.

## Sample Proof

- **A statement is made that must be proven:**

"Calcium and iron deficiencies are the two biggest nutritional problems for women."

- **Evidence is presented that supports the statement:**

"Seven out of ten women in America do not get sufficient calcium."

". . . study conducted at blah blah medical center showed. . ."

". . . pregnant and lactating women consume under minimum daily requirement . . ."

- **Bridge:**

The general principle which authorizes making the step between the evidence and the claim: "Taking calcium supplements will provide women the necessary calcium and iron their diets do not provide."

- **Foundation:**

Statement or evidence supporting the bridge if audience won't readily accept the bridge: (cite some evidence showing the efficacy of taking vitamin supplements)

- **A claim is drawn from the statement and evidence:**

"Therefore, women should take 'CALTRATE with Iron.'" (This is your point of persuasion.)

- **Additional evidence is provided to support the claim or conclusion:**

"Each tablet contains 600 mg. of calcium bicarbonate."

". . . Studies cited in the JAMA, January 1994 issue, report that . . ."

". . . A survey of obstetricians (source) conducted by the NIH . . ."

- Address any Counterclaims ("Other studies have shown that calcium taken in supplements are not readily absorbed.") with a rebuttal: "Despite arguments presented by some physicians claiming that supplements are not readily absorbed, a recent study at Strong Memorial Hospital in Rochester, NY, showed that calcium supplements can, over time, raise the bone density in women between the ages of 50 and 85."

- Qualifiers are provided if needed to indicate the strength of the conclusion or conditions under which it may not apply: "Unless your diet is already rich in calcium and iron, you should start taking CALTRATE Plus Iron." (Use words like probably, unless, with the exception of . . ., etc.)

- Another way of describing this logical proof was designed by Stephen Toulmin. (Stephen Toulmin. *The Uses of Argument*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958.) His design is now the most common deductive model.

### Toulmin Model

In everyday life, the first part of the argument to emerge is frequently the claim we wish to make.

- **Statement/Premise:**

"Better communication will improve our recruiting record."

When the reader is already on our side, all we have to do is state the claim. But when the reader resists the claim, we must support it with evidence.

- **Evidence:**

"We are losing recruits to other schools." (data, data, data)

Just providing evidence may not be enough in difficult situations. The reader has to make a leap of generalization to see the relationship between the evidence and the claim. If the reader doesn't see the relationship—doesn't know it, agree with it, or happen to think of it at the moment—he or she won't be convinced. Adding more evidence won't help. Instead, we need to spell out the general principle or bridge, which authorizes making the step between the evidence and the claim.

- **Bridge:**

"Recruits are more likely to choose schools which communicate with them often during the recruiting process."

Perhaps the audience won't believe the bridge statement. They might say, "Recruits go to the most prestigious school they can." If the audience might disagree with the bridge, we need to provide it. When the proof is made explicit, the statement supporting the bridge is called the foundation.

- **Foundation:**

"Research shows that frequency and quality of communication were key factors in influencing recruits to attend a specific school. Communication strengthened recruits' initial interest and helped overcome objections. Our informal surveys of recruits show that they receive more mail and phone calls from other schools than from us." (Provide concrete data.)

- **Claim/Point of Persuasion:**

"We should contact all potential recruits by telephone and follow up in writing."

- Sometimes the reader may accept the bridge but think of a counterclaim that negates the claim.

- Counterclaim:

"Our communication style might be poor. Frequent communication might hurt rather than help."

If a counter argument exists, we must provide a rebuttal to it to be convincing.

- **Rebuttal:**

"We will offer training sessions to our coaches and hire a consultant to help them write effective letters."

Many claims cannot be made with 100% certainty. If the claim is only probably and not necessarily true, we need to limit it.

- **Limiters:**

"Better communication will help us recruit more effectively."

- **You can also limit a claim with the words probably and may be able with explicit disclaimers:**  
"These results are accurate with  $\pm 5.6$  percent." "This projection is based on surveys taken October 28<sup>th</sup>."

### Using Toulmin Logic in a Sample Memo to Subordinates

The following example (A Problem-solving Persuasive Memo) illustrates the use of the Toulmin model in a problem-solving persuasive message. The memo is written to persuade employees not to make personal calls on office phones. The memo makes use of words, phrases, sentences, or paragraphs which:

- Build a common ground;
- Offer evidence of the problem;
- Provide that the problem hurts the organization;
- Rebut counterclaims;
- Present the solution to the problem in general terms;
- Present the complete solution in specific terms;
- Picture the problem being solved;
- Limit the claims about additional reader benefits that may arise from the solution but are not certain to occur;
- Tell readers exactly what to do; and
- Build an image of the writer/speaker as someone who's on the same side as readers, helping them to solve their problems and achieve their goals.

### A Problem-Solving Persuasive Memo

February 19, 200X

- To: All Sales Representatives
- From: James Christopher Smith
- Subject: Improving Service of Customers' Phone Orders

All of you have told me that your customers are experiencing difficulties in placing orders because all the phone lines are tied up, and that some customers are ordering from other wholesalers as a result. This is causing you a loss in sales commissions.

The recent opening of the Johnson Wholesale House in Decatur has made competition in our field of wholesale drugs even keener. With the addition of this new warehouse, Johnson can service customers in all our sales areas almost as quickly as we can, and for approximately the same price. This new availability makes it even easier for our customers to call Johnson's instead of us. In fact, Glenn and Jack report that Walgreen's has increased its business with Johnson's from a sixth to a third of its total drug business. Sue and Jerry also say that several of the small independent drug stores in central Illinois, such as the ones in Effingham and Tuscola, have switched to Johnson's from us. With competition as fierce as this, we must make ordering from us a quick and easy operation.

Most orders are phoned in between 9:30 and 11:30 in the morning and 1:00 and 2:00 in the afternoon, according to the times indicated on the order forms from last month. The phone operators, however,

report that the lines are tied up throughout the day, usually by calls from the sales department. In order to relieve congestion, it is necessary to reduce phone activity in the sales department.

Using the pay phones for personal calls during the peak ordering hours can make more phone lines available to our customers. If possible, calls on company business should be made during non-peak hours. This will enable us to keep more lines open during the peak ordering hours without spending money on costly new lines.

With the lines open to incoming calls, customers will find that they can place their orders quickly and easily. This will encourage them to keep calling us instead of our competitors, which can mean greater sales for you. In addition, good service helps build good will which may enable you to get a bigger share of your customers' business. The easy phone ordering service will also serve you as an additional selling point for new customers.

To improve customer relations and realize greater sales, use the pay phones for personal calls between the peak hours of 9:30 - 11:30 and 1:00 - 2:00, and make outgoing business calls during non-peak hours.

### **Evaluating Arguments**

- By comparing an argument to the Toulmin model, you can see what kind of statements you need to make an argument convincing. Each of the examples is unconvincing, but the solutions differ.

#### **Argument 1**

- "By using XTROCUT tubing, you can cut production time and reduce scrap loss."
- Problem with argument
- This argument needs evidence to support each to its claims.
- Revised argument
- "Because XTROCUT comes in lengths and shapes you use most often, you spend less time cutting down longer tubes. Since you can order just the length you want, you won't waste feet every time you need a 10-foot tube."

#### **Argument 2**

- "The workers I talked to were split 50/50. The workers at our plant don't agree whether the benefits package is adequate."
- Problem with argument
- No bridge shows that the "workers I talked to" were a representative sample. The audience may also wonder whether things have changed since the date of the poll.
- Revised argument
- "I talked to a representative sample of workers. They were split 50/50. Last week, the workers didn't agree whether the benefits package is adequate."

#### **Argument 3**

- "Our national advertising campaign will run during the most popular TV shows this month. This ad campaign will increase our sales dramatically."
- Problem with argument
- Such a claim cannot be made with certainty; too many variables affect sales.

- Revised argument
- "Our national advertising campaign will run during the most popular TV shows this month. This ad campaign will support our sales reps' efforts to increase sales 5% over last month."

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