

How to Become a Better Business Writer: Part One

by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.

You can have or do something really fabulous but if you cannot communicate about it you will not be successful. That's why it is critical to hone your business writing skills. The effectiveness of your writing will be measured by whether or not it achieves its objective. You do that by catching your readers' attention, making them think about what you are presenting, and leaving them wanting more.

Know your audience. Put yourself in your readers' shoes. How much do they know? How much do they need to know? Will they need to be convinced? If so, how much? Will they have objections? If so, how strong do you expect they will be? These and other questions will impact how you present the information you have. You can't effectively target people unless you understand what motivates them. Don't bother writing unless you research your readers in advance.

Know your message. Content is king. We live in a world of special effects and attention-getting devices. But all the bells and whistles in the world will not help you if you are not intimately familiar with the topic you are writing about. Grab your readers' interest with your headline. Draw them in further with the first sentence of your first paragraph. Then give them an overview of the material you intend to cover.

Your goal is to be clear and concise. Use a new paragraph to introduce each new idea. Share relevant, accurate information with each idea you present. And be sure to distinguish facts from opinions. To present a convincing argument, avoid negative constructions. Structure your ideas positively for better results. Avoid redundancy but do sum your points up in a tidy conclusion.

Outline before Writing. This is probably the most important advice in the article. Establish your starting point, where you want to go, and how you are going to get there. Organizing your material before you start writing is an excellent way to deliver a message that is not only more forceful but also easier to follow. Be sure to substantiate your points with relevant evidence. Present your topic. Introduce your points in the body of your document and back them up with relevant data and pertinent information. After you summarize the issues you have addressed for your readers, you are in a position to draw conclusions and make recommendations.

Pay Attention to Style. There are many tricks to make your writing more succinct, audience-friendly, and easier to follow.

- Use Gender-Neutral Construction to avoid alienating any of your readers. This can often be accomplished by substituting singular references with plural ones.
- Use 'signposts.' These are words that purposefully direct the reader. They include: 'by contrast,' 'finally,' 'furthermore,' 'next,' 'therefore,' and 'thus.'

- Use transitional words. They help your writing flow more smoothly. Some transitional words are: ‘also,’ ‘in addition,’ ‘meanwhile,’ and ‘nevertheless.’
- Use the word ‘may’ in place of ‘can’ to explain a product’s capabilities.
- Describe a product’s capabilities with ‘and’ to link related items. Use ‘as well as’ to link items that are not related.
- Use infinitives to eliminate subordinate clauses, and prepositional phrases to streamline your ideas

Use a Friendly, Conversational Tone to Show Interest. Stuffy language turns readers off. Be conversational unless the document demands a more formal style. State ideas in a positive form whenever possible. Readers are more receptive to information presented in the positive.

Ensure Readability. Make what you write easy-to-read. That means using simple words, relatively short sentences, and short paragraphs. There are many readability formulas you can apply to your writing to test its readability. One of the standards was developed by Rudolph Flesch. His specific mathematical formula states: $RE = 206.835 - (1.015 \times ASL) - (84.6 \times ASW)$.

- RE = Readability Ease
- ASL = Average Sentence Length (number of words divided by number of sentences)
- ASW = Average Number of Syllables divided by the number of words)
- RE is a number that ranges from 0 to 100. The higher the score, the easier the document is to read. (90 - 100: easily understood by a fifth grader), (60 -70: easily understood by eighth and ninth graders), (0- 30: easily understood by college graduates).

Your writing will also be easier to understand if you avoid language that is too formal or too informal. And be sure to tell your readers what abbreviations stand for the first time they are used. Always be sensitive to your readers to keep them with you.

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