

How to Become a Better Business Writer: Part Two

by Carol Dunitz, Ph.D.

How to Become A Better Business Writer: Part One covered the basics. Now it's time to dive back in and learn how to add the finesse. Aladdin didn't understand the magic of his lamp until he started to polish it. Your research and organization are done. You've finished the first draft. Now you need to go back through your document to refine it into a communication you can be proud to send out or give to others.

Keep It Interesting. Vary the length of the sentences you use to keep the flow of your communication interesting. Compare and contrast. Use metaphors and quotations. Pepper your writing with stories that substantiate the points you are making. Avoid cliches and archaic phrases as well as acronyms, buzzwords, gobbledegook, and jargon.

Don't Leave Readers Confused. Use specific, concrete words to convey meaning. Vague references leave room for significant misunderstanding. Fuzzy details leave your readers filling in the blanks -- and they may not have the right answers.

Use the Active Voice. Have your subject 'do' the action. Your writing will be more interesting and alive. Passive voice should be used sparingly. Action verbs make writing more exciting. They give even more life to your writing than colorful adjectives.

Use Good Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling. Careless writing costs you business. When your writing is careless and sloppy, clients assume your work is careless and sloppy. Your computer's grammar and spellcheck will catch some mistakes but leave many behind for your readers. It's up to you to catch the rest of them. Here are some additional pointers that will help improve your writing.

- Capitalize proper names *only*.
- Use hyphens between adjectives describing each other.
- Write out 'and' and 'percent' instead of using '&' and '%.'
- Use Parallel Structure by putting related ideas in the same form and tense in sentences *and* bulleted lists.

Edit. Edit. Edit. Proofread and then have someone else proofread your work. Even professional writers need to go back over their work. Make sure your reasoning is logical. Cover alternative arguments and conclusions. Check your facts for accuracy. Cite your sources. Sometimes it helps to put your document aside overnight and look at it the next day with a fresh pair of eyes. You'll be able to be more objective. Do you have a colleague or friend whose advice you respect? Ask them to look your writing over for you.

Make Your Document Visually Appealing. Your document will be easier to read when you allow adequate white space. Format your text thoughtfully with bold headlines, sub-headlines, bulleted lists and indention. They act as signposts to direct readers and make your document more attractive. Be sure to use a typeface that is easy-to-read.

Make your document easier to read by avoiding widows and orphans -- short or single lines of type at the bottom or top of a page. They are not aesthetically pleasing and slow readers down. Justify the left margin *only* is also a reader-friendly strategy. It ensures there are no uneven gaps between words and makes reading easier.

Add colorful photographs, pictures, and other graphics -- when appropriate -- for increased spark. And don't forget to use good quality paper when your project will benefit by it.

Effective writing is clear, concise, and interesting. If you write with your readers' best interest in mind and are sensitive to their needs they will be appreciative and receptive *always*.

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