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Why good writing matters

<i>“Good writing consists simply</i>	8	Introduction
<i>of choosing a handful of words</i>	9	The communication revolution
<i>from the half a million or</i>	10	Put it in writing
<i>so samples available, and</i>	12	A key business skill
<i>arranging them in the best</i>	13	How to improve your writing
<i>order.” (Keith Waterhouse)</i>	14	Summary

Hot tip

Keep it short and simple (KISS).

Introduction

The ability to communicate effectively in writing is a key business skill. Whether you're drafting a lengthy company report or sending a short email to colleagues, it's vital to get it right.

When problems arise within any organization, they can often be traced back to a breakdown in communication. Often the most effective way to communicate is in writing. Writing clearly and concisely, and in a style that's acceptable to the reader, is a key business skill – and one which no organization, big or small, private or public, can afford to neglect.

If you're new to any other kind of business activity, you're likely to be given some kind of training. Yet few organizations put real effort into ensuring that their people have the ability to write effectively. Writing skills – like any other skills – don't just happen. They have to be worked at. This book will help you to do just that.



The communication revolution

In recent years no other aspect of business has changed as rapidly and radically as communication. 30 years ago letters, reports, notes, memos and minutes of meetings were either dictated or written out in longhand. Then they were typed up.

New technology has changed all that; it has transformed the way we communicate. Personal computers, emails and the internet have revolutionized our working lives. It's almost impossible to imagine how we managed to work without laptops and cell phones, but now these too are being replaced by a new generation of electronic gadgets.

ABC

Today communication in most organizations has become less formal than in the past, and business is often conducted orally or by email. This does not mean that written communication is any less important. On the contrary: when business is conducted orally, it can be critically important to ensure that the written record is:

- Accurate
- Brief
- Clear

It's easy to remember: ABC. Before you put fingers to keyboard (or pen to paper), get your mind around those three simple words: accurate, brief, clear. They are the keys to effective business writing.

Don't forget



Successful organizations make effective communication a key priority.



Hot tip

Put yourself in the shoes of the reader.

Put it in writing

Which is best? Oral or written communication? Obviously, it depends on the circumstances. It depends on:

- What you have to communicate
- Why you have to communicate it
- How important it is
- How urgent it is
- Who you have to communicate it to
- The culture of your organization – “the way things are done around here”
- Your own personal circumstances and management style

So there is no one correct answer. Sometimes a telephone call, a one-to-one chat or a meeting is the best option. Sometimes you'll need to do it in writing.

Most people take in information more readily through their eyes than they do through their ears. If you listen to a lecture, you'll remember a little of what you've heard. But you'll forget a great deal. If you see something – say, text on a PowerPoint presentation or on a piece of paper – you're more likely to remember it.

So if what you're communicating is important, it's usually best to put it in writing, even if you also communicate it orally. And even with information that's not very important, written communication may sometimes be the better choice simply because – if it is clear, concise and well written – it can do the job more effectively.

A key business skill

Some organizations assume that everyone can write. And maybe they can – after a fashion. Chances are, they'll have a decent vocabulary, reasonable spelling, and a pretty good idea of what they want to say. But can they say it:

- clearly
- concisely
- in a way that's immediately understandable, and
- in a style that's acceptable to the reader?

Not everyone who is highly skilled in other business disciplines (say, project management or IT) can express himself/herself clearly in writing. And someone who has a high level of professional or technical expertise, perhaps gained doing work that has involved little or no writing, may find himself/herself promoted into a job where writing skills are vitally important.

In today's fast-moving business environment most people simply do not have the time to read stuff that's either over-long or unfathomably difficult to understand. The ability to write a short note that's crystal clear is a key business skill.

Beware



Most people do not have time to read long, complex reports.

Making it easy for the reader

Writing that is clear and concise does not mean taking less trouble over it and spending less time on it than you would over a longer, more detailed note. On the contrary: it often requires more thought and takes more time. You need to think really hard:

- to identify the essential details that must be included
- to present those in the clearest, most reader-friendly way you can

Writing clearly and concisely does not make it any easier for the writer. What good business writing should do is to make it a lot easier for the reader.

How to improve your writing

There are two easy ways to improve your writing ability:

- Write as often as you can
- Read as much as you can

These are the two key pieces of advice Stephen King, the world's number one horror writer, gives to anyone aspiring to be a writer.

“Writing is one of the few activities where quantity will inevitably make quality,” says thriller writer Harlan Coben. “The more you write, the better you’re going to get at it. That’s for sure.”

King and Coben write bestselling novels, not business documents. But the points they make are valid for every kind of writing under the sun – including business writing. The more you do it, the better you will get. It’s guaranteed. Get into the habit of writing with accuracy, brevity and clarity. The more practice you have, the easier it will be.

Reading good examples of the kind of writing you have to produce yourself will also help to develop good writing habits. Of course, thrillers and horror novels are probably not the best models if you want to improve the effectiveness of your business writing. You’ll want to focus on good examples of non-fiction writing.

For business writing you can hardly do better than to study a few articles in *Forbes*, *The Economist* or the *Financial Times*. Those publications provide news, analysis and comment on all kinds of economic, political, commercial, industrial, technological and financial subjects. Frequently the subject-matter is highly complex. But the writing is invariably such that it can be readily understood by an intelligent reader who is not an expert on the subject. And that’s exactly what’s required for business writing: clear, concise prose which the reader (who often does not know as much about the subject as the writer) can readily understand.

Summary

- Writing is a skill that – like any other skill – has to be worked at
- Problems within any organization can often be traced back to a breakdown in communication
- Most people take in information more readily through their eyes than through their ears
- Often the most effective way to communicate is in writing
- Effective business writing requires accuracy, brevity and clarity
- When business is conducted orally, it can be critically important to have an accurate written record
- Few people have time to read long and complex communications
- Keep it as short and simple as you can
- Writing a short, concise note can take more time and effort than a longer, more detailed account
- Good business writing means presenting the information in the most reader-friendly way you can
- Putting yourself in the shoes of the reader is often the key to effective writing
- Good writing is a key business skill
- The more you write, the better you'll get
- Look at *Forbes*, *The Economist* or the *Financial Times* for good examples of clear, concise business writing