

Good Business Writing

This article is adapted from, *Effective Writing for the Workplace* by Clair White. The article was published in The Internet Writing Journal (<http://www.writerswrite.com/journal/cew1.htm>).

Mastering the elements of good business writing can make or break your career. That makes effective workplace writing an essential skill. The rules are basically the same for any type of writing, but this article addresses some of the special issues that arise in a business context.

Know Your Audience

The key to effective business writing is about knowing your audience. Think about the recipient of your document before you sit down to compose your letter, memo, or report. What are you trying to say to this person?

Organization is crucial, and outlines are an invaluable aid to writing a lengthy report or memo because time is in short supply for most business professionals. By organizing your thoughts beforehand, you can determine exactly what you are trying to say and decide what details must be included in your report or memo.

Statistics and research bolster your conclusions, especially if presented in a visually appealing manner. Look for graphic elements to add to your presentation. With the advent of modern word processing programs, it is easy to include spread sheets, graphs, and clip art to your report to make your work memorable and convincing.

After you have decided on your message, work on saying it concisely.

- Be brief when possible.
- Avoid wordiness and unnecessary large words.
- Strive for clarity in your writing and avoid vagueness (unless there is good reason to be vague).

For example:

1. **Wordy** - It is the responsibility of the recruiting committee to ensure that the goals of the hiring task force have been implemented.
Precise - Our recruiting committee must meet the hiring goals of the hiring task force.
2. **Wordy** - The hurricane had the effect of a destructive force on the manufacturing plant.
Precise - The hurricane destroyed the manufacturing plant.

Avoid using vague words when a more precise word will do. Take a tip from journalists. Tell the audience what you are going to say, say it using action verbs, then sum up what it is you have said—and say it in as few words as possible.

Punctuation and Grammar

You cannot proofread your own work with 100% accuracy; your mind is too efficient.

It is always easier to find errors in someone else's work.

Nothing can kill your credibility in a business setting faster than grammar and/or punctuation errors, especially in a formal report.

Many errors are due simply to insufficient proofreading of the document. Corporate lawyers routinely have a secretary read a very long document aloud to a second person who checks for errors in the text.

Obviously, you will not always have time for this procedure. However, before you issue a formal report, especially one that will be seen by upper management or will go outside the firm, you must have someone else proofread your document. The reason is simple; you cannot proofread your own work with 100% accuracy. Occasionally, the human mind will be too efficient and simply will supply the missing word in a sentence (so that you will never notice that it is gone) or will transpose letters into their correct order. It is always easier to find errors in someone else's work.

Some errors stem not from lack of proofreading, but from simple grammatical mistakes. The most common mistakes include:

- Misuse of apostrophes;
- Splitting of infinitives (although this rule has been revoked by many style manuals, it still drives some people to distraction to see a split infinitive except in creative writing or dialogue);
- Using contractions in formal writing;
- Misuse of commas;
- Incomplete sentences;
- Ending a sentence with a preposition;
- Verbs not agreeing with subjects; and
- Pronouns not agreeing with their antecedents.

Invest in a good dictionary ([Canadian Oxford Dictionary](#)), a good grammar book ([Grammatically Correct: The Writer's Guide to Punctuation, Spelling, Style, Usage, and Grammar](#)), and a good style book ([A Guide to Canadian English Usage](#)). Then use them.

Effective Use of Passive Voice

How many times have you heard the admonition, "Don't use passive voice! Punch up your writing with active voice!"?

In general, you should use active voice whenever possible in your writing but, like every other rule in English, there is an exception. Sometimes the passive voice can be a useful tool for avoiding blame for an error or for making a sentence intentionally vague. Effective use of passive voice in business writing is an art.

Sometimes you will be called upon to write a memo or other report describing a corporate disaster that occurred because someone made a mistake. Passive voice can be used to describe the mistake without directly placing blame, especially if the recipient of the memo happens to be:

- a. Your superior in the company; and/or
- b. The person who made the error that led to the disaster.

In this situation it would be tactless; to say the least, to use active voice boldly to describe how your boss erred—not to mention the deleterious effect it could have upon your career. Tactful honesty is a skill greatly admired in corporate Canada. Use it when needed, but use it sparingly.

For example, change sentence (a) to sentence (b):

- a. "Because J. Smith forgot to include the correct budget projections with the bid, we lost the client,"
- b. "The correct budget projections were inadvertently left out of the client packet and this led to the loss of the client."

The second sentence is vague. It is unclear who left out the crucial enclosure. Your boss knows very well who is at fault and will appreciate you are not blaring the obvious to the entire company. Of course, this does leave the door open for you to be blamed for the catastrophe. Careful wording of who had responsibility for the client pitch will alleviate this problem.

Passive voice, in general, should be avoided in business writing. However, there are times when judicious use of passive voice can increase the tact and diplomacy of your writing.

"Sometimes the passive voice can be a useful tool for avoiding placing blame for an error or for intentionally making a sentence vague."

Effective use of passive voice in business writing is an art."

Gender-Neutral Writing

This is a difficult topic for the business professional. Under the traditional rules, the word "he" included both the female and male genders when referring to an individual's actions. "Everyone should open his report to page 1" was understood to refer to both the women and the men in the room.

In today's society, many women take offense at this reference. For a time, writers used "she" in their writing, (sometimes alternating with "he"). This is confusing to the reader, to say the least, and is offensive to many men.

The best way to deal with this problem is to eliminate the pronoun altogether whenever possible: "Everyone should open the report to page 1."

Most corporations are formal places and grammatical errors will be seen simply as that—not as an example of your tactfulness regarding a gender issue.

Use a form of "he or she", which is correct, if somewhat annoying when used many times in the same article.

Some business writers have suggested pluralizing the pronoun as a solution to the problem. "Everyone should open their report to page 1." This is common in spoken English, but is grammatically incorrect according to current usage. Nevertheless, some argue that it is better to be grammatically incorrect than to risk offending half of the population.

Actually, "their" has been used for several hundred years to refer to a singular antecedent of indeterminate gender by famous authors including Jane Austen, C.S. Lewis, Charles Dickens, and William Shakespeare.

Some scholars advocate the use of neologisms such as "hir" (a combination of his and her), and the issue is a hot one in some academic circles. Unless your boss holds a doctorate in English, however, it is unlikely that he or she is aware of this controversy and simply will think that you cannot distinguish between singular and plural pronouns. If this is the case, steer clear of "their".

With the exception of certain industries, most corporations are formal places and grammatical errors will be seen simply as that—not as an example of your tactfulness regarding a gender issue. If you must, use a form of "he or she", which is correct, if somewhat annoying when used many times in the same article. "Everyone should open his or her report to page 1."

When you do not know the gender of the person you are addressing in correspondence, the old rule was to write, "Dear Sirs". This is no longer acceptable. Write "Dear Sir or Madam", or better yet, use the title of the unknown addressee. "Dear Editor", for example. If you know only the initial and last name of the addressee, address the letter as "Dear J. Smith".

Recent Trends in Business Writing

Many recent articles describe a relaxation of formality in Canada's workplace, in everything from dress to writing styles. These articles urge professionals and workers to dispense with formality. While it is true that formality in the workplace has relaxed somewhat in the past ten years, a word of caution is in order.

First, many of these articles are not written by business professionals. Although some industries have relaxed formality in dress and in writing styles, many have not—especially those in the financial, banking, and legal sectors. The region of the country in which your company is located must also be considered. For example, attire that is fine for a computer design firm in Vancouver might not be at all appropriate in a large bank in Toronto. The same applies to writing styles.

The best approach is to obtain writing samples written by the CEO and other top officers of your company. Are they formal in style or informal?

The tone of a company is set by the person or persons at the top of the company. You should tailor your writing style to match this style, just as you would tailor your dress to the style of the company for which you work. Some firms pride themselves on the fact that their employees do not wear suits—computer companies and companies in the graphic arts often follow this creed. Others, such as those in the financial services industry, pride themselves on the fact that they have not relaxed any formality requirements even though the world around them has changed.

The best rule is to follow the style of your company's upper-echelon leaders. If they use a formal style for inter-office memos, you should too. If they subscribe to the new rules of simple, more direct business writing, then you should as well. If in doubt, always use the more formal approach in a memo or letter, especially when writing to your superior officers. Remember, writing in the workplace is not the same as writing for a scholarly journal or writing for a newspaper or magazine, although the goal (communication) is the same. Communication is best achieved by writing in the preferred style of the recipient of your document—especially if the recipient influence on your chances of promotion.

Formality, however, does not mean wordiness. Formality means avoiding contractions and slang, addressing people by their titles, and using the proper technical terms. Even when writing in a more formal style, you should strive to avoid excess verbiage. Aim for concise sentences that get your point across quickly to save the reader time.

Time is one of a business person's most precious resources. Get to the point of your memo or letter immediately and your readers will thank you.

"Communication is best achieved by writing in the preferred style of the recipient of your document -- especially if the recipient has anything to do with your chances of promotion."

Conclusion

The rules for punctuation and style can, at times, confuse even the most educated person. This situation is exacerbated by gender issues and the coining of new words and phrases to describe new technology.

When dealing with marketing or advertising writing, often the best course for a business is to call in a professional writer from outside the firm. After all, no one is an expert in everything.

With the trend towards instant and global communications, a company's written communications and marketing literature establish a reputation and brand identity in front of a larger audience than ever before. Shouldn't the writing be done by someone whose expertise is words?

If you get in over your head, call in a professional writer—you'll be glad you did.

Claire E. White is an attorney with over fifteen years' experience in major law firms. She is a former instructor at the University of California at Irvine Extension and is a frequent lecturer and writer on legal and business topics including computer law, corporate law, the Internet and effective business communications.