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## The Write Skills: Tips for Improving Your Business Writing

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### Abstract (Document Summary)

1. Don't labor to impress the reader. Do you feel you need lots of metaphors or six-syllable words to impress the reader? If so, it may be time to rethink things. The goal of writing in the business setting is not to impress, but to communicate. You don't need flowery language or a huge vocabulary to succeed.

For example, in writing a persuasive sales letter you might use catchy phrasing and varied sentence structure to establish an upbeat, positive tone. This could include pertinent facts, anecdotes, quotes, or comparisons with products offered by competitors. You also might employ informal language, and in some cases humor, to generate reader interest. For instance, a phrase such as "you'll love the way our headphones caress your ears" is designed to avoid the rigidity too often found in business communication.

5. Master basic rules of grammar and usage. Correct grammar is an essential element of effective writing. The same is true of proper usage. "Grammar" refers to following standard rules for putting words together; "usage" refers to the use and choice of words. While some aspects of communication may be left to the writer's discretion, the basic rules of grammar and usage are not a matter of choice.

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The Write Skills: Tips for Improving Your Business Writing.

There is no getting around it. The written word is crucial to your professional success. The ability to write effective memos, letters, reports and other items is a common job requirement.

In addition, your chances of gaining employment in the first place, or of moving on to a better position, may rest on your writing capabilities. First-rate resumes, application letters and other materials are vital elements of the job search.

Certainly, you need not be the next Tom Clancy to succeed in the business world. But poor writing can cause you all kinds of problems, from confusing the reader to making you look less intelligent than you are. On the other hand, if you're adept at writing, anyone who reads your work is likely to form a positive impression of you.

By focusing on just a few basics, you can assure yourself of a solid performance in the vital area of written communication. Here are seven tips for improving your writing.

1. Don't labor to impress the reader. Do you feel you need lots of metaphors or six-syllable words to impress the reader? If so, it may be time to rethink things. The goal of writing in the business setting is not to impress, but to communicate. You don't need flowery language or a huge vocabulary to succeed.

If your true aim is to communicate, don't fall victim to the tendency to select complex words when simpler ones will fill the same need. Except in highly technical matters, simple language is usually the most effective.

For example, instead of inquire, write ask. Substitute use for utilize. Choose after over subsequent to, help rather than facilitate, and start as opposed to initiate or commence. Instead of strategize, just say plan.

Follow the same spirit in other word selections. By keeping words simple, your meaning will remain clear while the style of your writing avoids any measure of pretension. At the same time, when you need to use more complex words (especially those of a specialized nature, such as computer lingo or financial jargon), you can do so freely without worrying about a lack of balance between simple and more complex terminology.

2. Establish the right tone. Different types of business communication require different tones. Depending on the circumstances, you might want to appear demanding, apologetic, complimentary or persuasive. To that end, strive to make your words, and the way you present them, convey a tone which meets the basic purpose for writing in the first place.

For example, in writing a persuasive sales letter you might use catchy phrasing and varied sentence structure to establish an upbeat, positive tone. This could include pertinent facts, anecdotes, quotes, or comparisons with products offered by competitors. You also might employ informal language, and in some cases humor, to generate reader interest. For instance, a phrase such as "you'll love the way our headphones caress your ears" is designed to avoid the rigidity too often found in business communication.

A letter of complaint, on the other hand, should be more formal. Its tone is serious. This can be achieved with short, blunt sentences and an absence of contractions. To get your point across, use phrases such as "please take care of this immediately" or "I will expect a full refund" to make it very clear exactly what action is expected.

3. Be concise. Is it true that more is better? That may be the case if you're talking salaries, but it does not apply to the written word. Most business people have plenty to do and don't want to waste time reading more than is needed. Thus, when writing memos or letters, keep them short. Most correspondence should be only one or two pages long. Reports and proposals may be longer, but even with more comprehensive documents, extraneous material should be deleted.

In addition to making sure documents are no longer than necessary, strive to keep each sentence as clear and uncluttered as possible. The more concise each sentence is, the greater the chance that your message will be fully understood by the reader.

In oral conversation, which tends to lack precision, anything which is not immediately clear can be clarified by the speaker through amplification or correction. But written work must stand entirely on its own, since it may be the only contact between the writer and the reader.

One way to achieve clarity is to eliminate any unnecessary words. For instance, instead of writing the software which is outdated, say outdated software (this cuts the number of words by 60 percent). You can also reduce phrases such as the consultant offered a suggestion to the consultant suggested, or the board of directors granted authorization to the board authorized. In the same way, avoid phrases such as green in color or rectangular in shape. Since green is a color, that single word will suffice.

Lengthy sentences can lead to problems. They are more likely to contain grammatical errors since the writer must successfully balance more elements. Also, the chance of the reader misunderstanding the message is greater, as he or she must grasp more information. How long is too long when it comes to sentences? There is no single answer, but most sentences should be no longer than 30 words.

4. Use appropriate formats. In school, you were probably required to present material in specific formats. For example, research papers followed standards spelled out by your instructor for spacing, attribution of sources, etc.

In the business world, readers also expect you to follow prescribed formats. Consider the two basic types of correspondence: letters and memos. Both are really variations of the same thing. The main difference is not in tone -- as many think -- but in audience. A letter is generally designed for someone outside your organization, while a memo targets an internal audience. Of course, there can be exceptions (as in a letter sent to an employee's home for legal purposes), but for the most part memos go to members of your own organization.

Regardless of content, memos and letters are generally organized in different formats. A letter has an inside address, a salutation and other elements, and memos follow a simpler format. In each case, it is important to follow the conventions of business correspondence.

The same is true of reports, proposals and other business documents. If you're not sure of correct formats, study other similar material produced within your organization. Or consult a reference work such as L. Sue Baugh's Handbook for Business Writing.

5. Master basic rules of grammar and usage. Correct grammar is an essential element of effective writing. The same is true of proper usage. "Grammar" refers to following standard rules for putting words together; "usage" refers to the use and choice of words. While some aspects of communication may be left to the writer's discretion, the basic rules of grammar and usage are not a matter of choice.

Have you always found it difficult to use adverbs correctly? Or had a tendency to misplace modifiers, or violate the rules of subject-verb agreement? If so, don't despair. Anyone with a little motivation can improve mastery of the basic rules of English grammar and usage.

As a first step, take a refresher course. This could be a college class, a seminar or a self-study course. (For example, self-paced courses in several related areas are available from the American Management Association; call 800-262-9699 for details.) Also, be willing to take extra measures such as completing practice exercises or writing key examples in notebooks and keeping them on your desk for easy reference. Or consult one of the many excellent books available on the subject, such as the Harbrace College Handbook, available in libraries and bookstores. Just as in other areas of your professional life, you can make improvements in grammar and usage through focused effort.

If you're not sure just where you need improvement, ask someone else (a writer, editor, English teacher or other person with a solid command of grammar and usage) to review some of your written work. Then use the resulting analysis to plan your own self-improvement program.

6. Take time to revise. Perhaps the best-kept secret about the writing process is this: Once is not enough. For important correspondence, reports or other material, the first draft should not be the only one. Ideally, it's best to write an initial version, and then invest the time to refine it.

Revision involves several steps. First, take a close look at the overall organization of your document. Have you provided enough information to accomplish your communication goal? Is it organized in a clear, logical fashion? Are your purposes for writing (and expectations for the reader's response, if any) apparent?

Next, look at the finer points. Eliminate unnecessary words. Check for errors in grammar or spelling (use a computer spell-check program, if available). Try to vary your word choices by replacing frequently used ones with their synonyms or re-wording in other ways.

After you have made changes, carefully read the material again. If time allows, set it aside and return to it later. You'll find that by being alert to possible weaknesses, you can invariably enhance the quality of the finished work.

7. Take full advantage of your writing skills in the job search process.

The phrase "business writing" is often used when referring to work-related communication. But these same skills also apply to the process of competing for job openings.

In applying for a job, your writing ability may play a major role. Prospective employers will judge you, at least in part, by written information you provide in resumes, letters of application, and responses to questions posed on application forms.

Experts on writing resumes always recommend that job seekers keep them brief and present their information in a favorable light. While such advice is valuable, don't overlook the basic need to keep resumes as clear and error-free as possible.

In writing resumes, take time to use careful, precise language. If you are uncertain how to structure a resume, consult one of the many guides available on the subject. Then follow the same principles used in other business writing. In addition, be consistent in the way you present information. For example, if you use upper-case letters for one job title, do the same for other positions.

Some employers require applicants to fill out application forms. Completing these can be a bit frustrating, especially if you have already developed a great resume but now must spend additional time in duplicating the information. In addition, pre-printed forms pose challenges in that they may ask for different facts, or details organized in different ways from the way it was done on your resume.

In completing such forms, be sure to respond to each item, since blank spaces can make you appear sloppy or evasive. Double-check spelling, accuracy of dates, position titles and other facts. Unless it is prohibited, attach a copy of your resume to supplement the material presented in the application. Before submitting it, take a few minutes to carefully proofread everything.

When mailing a resume or application, be sure to include a cover letter. In most cases this will be a simple transmittal letter. It should indicate that you are interested in being considered for employment, specify the job in which you are interested, and note that your resume or application is enclosed. Sometimes employers will ask for more details in a letter of application, such as why you are interested in the job and how your qualifications match the employer's needs. Here, the most important point is to respond to each point listed in the job announcement by writing clear, carefully structured sentences.

Resumes, application forms and cover letters, like other job-related materials, reflect your sense of professionalism. Always give them the time and effort required for a first-class product. Develop draft copies first, and then review and revise them. Follow the same principles of effective writing used in other written work. Remember, such materials reflect not only the abilities, but also the commitment to quality, of the writer. If you want to get ahead, make sure your writing always shows dedication to doing a good job.

Photo (A woman at a typewriter)

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