
Ten super simple tips for better business writing

Whatever job you do, and whatever industry you're in, chances are you need to write from time to time to get your message across. In today's environment of information overload, when you can't stand on tiptoes in a crowd of people waving your arms in the air and shouting "Hey, listen – this is interesting!" how do you get noticed? These simple tips will help.

Grab attention

Attract attention by summarising the key points of your message up front. You can do this using a benefit-led headline, or an introductory paragraph that summarises the who, what, when, where, why and how of your message.

This involves a bit of planning. Say you're telling your customers about a launch event for a new product that could really help them. What do you need them to know? As well as giving them a teaser of the benefits of the product, to raise their interest, you'll need to tell them where and when the event is taking place, how much it costs... plus any other useful information such as a link for directions and the fact that parking is free at the venue.

Tie this all up under an attention-grabbing headline or subject line, and don't forget your call to action – we'll come on to that later.

Keep it short

These days we're all overloaded with information. Your writing needs to cut through the communication chatter. Keep it brief. Make every single word count. Use short, punchy sentences and paragraphs, and avoid filler words that add nothing to your message, such as THAT, JUST and VERY.

The internet has massively added to the number of messages we're subjected to each day, and we've become used to getting our information in bite-sized chunks, thanks to everything from 140-character tweets to the news in 60 seconds. According to research, 15 to 19-year-olds spend just six minutes per weekend reading. These are our future target buyers.

According to research, this information overload means verbal intelligence is dropping and visual intelligence is increasing. Mark Zuckerberg, CEO of Facebook, expects the platform's news feed to be mostly video within five years. (That has pretty big implications for those of us who write for a living, but that's a whole different subject.)

Competition for readers' attention is fierce. You may be writing an email that needs to grab the attention of a marketing manager with an inbox bursting with subject lines all clamouring to be noticed. How will you stand out?

When you think about it this way, you see how important it is to be short, succinct and concise. Your readers are busy people. Don't waste time – get straight to the point.

Keep it simple

Communicate clearly using simple language and plain English. Avoid business speak, buzzwords and jargon.

We all know people whose writing is verbose. They use ten words when four would do.

Which appeals to you more: "We would be delighted to assist you in this matter" or "We'd love to help"?

We've all been guilty of it. Many of us carry memories from school, when we had to write a 1,000-word essay on a subject we didn't know much about. Chances are we'd use a thesaurus to come up with obscure synonyms because we thought they made us sound more intelligent, then we'd pad it out to get to the required word count, saying the same thing twice using different words – sound familiar?

Plenty of people still write that way. They think big words, business speak and jargon impress readers, but they don't. Instead, they create a distance between you and your audience – which is the last thing you want when you're trying to get them on your side because you want to inspire them to do something.

How many times have you read something and thought, "Yes, but what does that actually mean?!". I have the best job in the world, because I get to rewrite and tighten up this lazy language, but everyone can improve their own writing.

Certain professions have a bad reputation for verbosity. Lawyers, doctors, estate agents, perhaps... But this affliction isn't limited to one industry or job title – jargon and business speak crop up everywhere.

Business these days is all about transparency, and being authentic. It's no longer okay for companies and organisations to hide behind language. Internal phrases might mean something to your colleagues but they're meaningless to your customers.

Keep it simple. Imagine the person who's reading your leaflet or blog post has no knowledge of the subject matter. How can you make them understand? You don't need to dumb down – just use clear language and plain English and you'll maximise the chances of your message being understood.

Make sure every word and every sentence works hard to communicate your message. Cut clichés and weak, meaningless phrases, and go for plain English every time.

Just remember, the clearer your language – and therefore your message – the easier it is to convince your reader to take action: whether that's buying your product, coming to your event, or choosing your business over your competitors.

Conversely, the more wordy and jargon-filled your message is, the more likely your reader is to switch off before the end, and not even reach your call to action.

Know your audience

It helps to have a good understanding of who you're writing for. Once you know your reader, thinking of your writing as a conversation with your audience will help you get the tone right.

Without an understanding of who you're trying to reach, it's hard to get inside their head. You need to address their fears and desires, because it's these that motivate them – and you want your audience to ACT.

Think about the problems they're dealing with on a daily basis, and focus on how you can solve those problems. Maybe you have a product that helps with time management – use empathy to show you understand the pressure your reader is under, then present your solution. You won't always have the luxury of knowing exactly who you're addressing, but you can't go far wrong with this approach.

Above all, speak directly to your audience. You're a human being, they're a human being – remember this when you're writing to them.

Be professional, not formal

Business writing doesn't need to be formal or stuffy. Aim for a professional and informative tone to keep your audience engaged and interested.

Formal, unapproachable writing belongs in the past. Language moves on, and it certainly has in this respect. When I first started freelancing, 17 years ago, I did a lot of work with a local council. In those days everything was super formal and written in the third person.

It took a lot of work to help them see that their readers weren't interested in dry language, stuffy statistics and boring bureaucracy – they just wanted to know how they would benefit from the service they were reading about.

Again, the internet has played a large part in the relaxation of language. I don't suggest you suddenly start using text speak in your business emails – heaven forbid – so maintain a professional tone but keep it approachable and friendly. Writing in the first person – using I or we – is the simplest way of doing this:

“We've launched...” or “I can help...” not “The council has launched...” or “The council can assist...”.

WIIFM?

Focus your writing on the benefits to your audience – the “what's in it for me?”. Engage your readers by talking about benefits, not features (remember, Canon don't sell cameras, they sell memories. Black & Decker don't sell drills, they sell holes).

Think about the last time you bought something. You choose the things you buy because of what they do for you, and how they make you feel. You don't buy beer because it's triple fermented – you buy it because it tastes great and it refreshes you. You don't buy moisturiser because it contains amino peptides – you buy it because it makes you look younger. (Well – that's the theory, anyway.)

Try reading what you've written from the perspective of a cynical reader. Can you ask “So what?” to what you've written? Remember, it's not about your business, it's about your customers.

Include a call to action

Your communication should aim to inform, entertain or inspire action. Be clear about your goal: what action do you want your reader to take as a result? This could be signing up for email updates, investing in a new product or simply attending a meeting.

Back to the product launch we talked about earlier. Your goal is to get as many people to come along as possible. Your call to action needs to clearly tell the reader how to book, and if necessary, when to book by.

People like to respond in different ways – some people prefer to call, others to email – so give a couple of options. You could even send out event invitations on Facebook, or set up an Eventbrite page.

Check, check and check again

Don't undo your good work by spelling your boss's name wrong, or including the wrong date for your event. Check your language, spelling and punctuation. Get a colleague to read it, or hire a professional proofreader (hello!) – a fresh pair of eyes will spot things you've overlooked. And never rely on your spellchecker as a substitute for proofreading.

Spellcheck doesn't know if you've repeated a word, or left one out; neither does it know if you've used the right word – it only knows if the words you've used are spelled incorrectly.

Homophones – words that sound the same, but have different spellings and different meanings – are another stumbling block:

- your, you're
 - to, too, two
 - there, they're, their
 - sight, site
 - board, bored
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Say it loud

When I finish any copywriting job there's one thing I do, without fail, before sending my work to the client – I read it out loud. Reading aloud makes it easier to identify repetition and inconsistency than reading on screen or in your head. I don't know why this works, I just know it does. Try it!

I usually rope one of my kids in as a willing volunteer – well, sometimes willing, other times a somewhat reluctant captive audience – but you don't have to read to someone. Just the process of reading aloud will help you spot things you hadn't noticed when reading in your head.

Sleep on it

If you have time in your schedule, review what you've written the following morning. It's amazing what you'll spot when you reread your document after some time away.

Okay, you won't always have the luxury of time on your side, but if you can build in even a couple of hours away from the document so you can reread it with a fresh pair of eyes you're more likely to notice repetition and mistakes you missed on the first read. You might notice a major mistake – like missing information – and come up with a better way of saying something, or perhaps a more persuasive call to action.

That's it! Hopefully at least a couple of these tips will have resonated, and you'll be fired up to put them into action next time you write for business. Let me know how you get on. You can email me at hello@sarahtownsendeditorial.co.uk or connect on social media: [@STECopywriting on Twitter](#) or [Sarah Townsend Editorial on Facebook](#). Good luck!