

Sheet of Tips

A few tips for better writing and speaking

Grammar is a good first step towards making sure you get through to the people you are communicating with, again because if we all follow the same rules, we can focus on our ideas, not on our words or spelling.

However, there are other things you can do to make it easier for others to understand you.

1. Be specific & clear

We often assume that other people think exactly like we do and know all the things we do, and while that may be true in some cases, it's always better to be as specific and clear as you feel you need to. Avoid jargon and don't try to impress. Try to explain everything as you would to someone who isn't as familiar with your field as you are. We all have a lot of info to juggle, so people will appreciate it if you don't force them to remember acronyms or think hard about what you meant.

2. Keep it short

This is a lot easier said than done and it's important to acknowledge that it takes time to write something that will seem simple and clear to others. Mark Twain said, "If I Had More Time I Would Write a Shorter Letter". But it also gets easier as you work on it.

It helps to start by outlining your document (i.e. writing down the key ideas you want to write about) then expanding from there while making sure the original structure still makes sense. Try to think about what it is you are trying to communicate.

3. Be professional, but not necessarily formal

While it's important to be professional in the workplace, you are still working with people who can be as stressed or tired as anyone else, so it helps to set others at ease with a good balance of professionalism when necessary and a more friendly tone when appropriate.

4. Read it out loud

It's easy to get lost in your own writing, so one trick that helps is to pretend you are delivering a speech to an audience. Try to imagine how they would react or what they would think about what you are saying. This will help you get organised but also get clear about what you're trying to say and how others will receive it. It also helps to print your writing and take notes on the paper, away from the distractions of the computer.

5. Don't be afraid to pause when speaking

When talking, don't be afraid to take breaks to gather your thoughts. People are often happy to wait a few seconds if what you will say is going to be clearer and easier for them to work with, rather than going for the first thing that comes to mind. A good example is Barack Obama, who pauses often, to then deliver a more well thought out argument.