Appendix A

Drive Organizational and Personal Success With Better Writing

You’ve decided that certain individuals in your organization—ranging from senior executives and supervisors to first-line managers and new hires—need to enhance their writing. To help ensure that your efforts produce meaningful improvements and achieve key goals, follow this course of action:

Recognize the writing–outcomes link.

Identify who needs to upgrade writing skills.

Get management buy-in.

Design the training course.

Cultivate a writing culture.

Develop a writing style guide.

(If you’re not responsible for others’ performance and want to hone your own skills, see “Improve Your Writing” at the end of this appendix.)

Recognize the Writing–Outcomes Link

“Good writing is so important. I’d love to get our staff to write better.” For years, I’ve heard these types of comments from learning and development or human resource professionals, senior leaders, and business owners. Though many are quick to disparage their employees’ writing, far fewer people in these roles understand how writing affects organizational success—and those who do often have difficulty explaining it to management. Plus, those who control the purse strings are often unwilling to make a significant investment in an apparently “intangible” initiative.

If you want to upgrade employees’ writing abilities, start by identifying your organization’s key measures of success, such as productivity, profitability, and engagement. Then try to link effective writing to each measure, and determine the negative consequences of poor or mediocre writing. These could include wasted time rereading convoluted emails, clients annoyed by offensive messages, leaders failing to motivate employees, and many more.

One of the best places to find out more about writing issues is from employees throughout the organization who recognize shortcomings in co-workers’ text and understand how they hurt. Those critics may include C-suite executives, division heads, line managers, or others. Complaints may even come from rank-and-file workers whose productivity is being stifled by cryptic messages from other departments or who resent the steady stream of rude emails from supervisors. You might also discover that clients are annoyed by your staff’s emails, which are unclear, condescending, or riddled with grammar errors and typos.

Identify Who Needs to Upgrade Writing Skills

Sometimes poor writing starts at the top. A surprising number of high achievers have risen through the ranks with substandard writing ability, partly because the business community traditionally didn’t value good writing. Their prowess in generating leads, closing deals, and managing others has catapulted them to the top of the organizational chart. But at some point, most of these individuals assume a new leadership role that requires them to write more. While a select few can call upon the corporate communications team to compose their messages, most leaders who write their own text often fall short in many ways. These include confusing directives, an offensive rather than a supportive tone, inability to persuade others to embrace their ideas, and failure to engage the staff. As a result, the organization suffers.

To proactively identify individuals who need to improve their writing, consider these tactics:

Contact those with responsibility for staff performance—including HR or learning directors, division heads, managers, and other key players—and ask them to assess the writing abilities of their direct reports and other employees with whom they interact. Also request sample emails or documents (with proprietary information deleted). If you receive too many writing examples for you to read on your own, build a team of people to review them. Then, based on the assessments and the samples, determine which individuals or groups would benefit most from writing instruction.

Discreetly ask senior leaders if they believe elevating their writing proficiency would help them achieve better results.

Solicit feedback from clients, suppliers, and others outside the organization with whom your employees correspond. Ask them to rate such measures as clarity, brevity, organization, and tone.

While many employees designated for a writing training will jump at the chance to upgrade their skills, others may feel offended that they were singled out for an apparent “writing deficiency.” Be sure to position these learning programs not as remedial but as a valuable opportunity to hone writing abilities, enhance productivity, and even help secure a promotion. Point out that even the most proficient business writers can learn new techniques that help them achieve better results for themselves and for the organization.

Get Management Buy-in

Before making the case to decision makers and securing resources for a writing training course, and reflect on your organizational culture: How much does your company value written communication and recognize its power to fuel better outcomes? (See the following section on building a culture that values writing.) Your assessment may influence your strategy for presenting the program to management, including the breadth of the proposed training course and the method of evaluation.

Even executives who appreciate the difference better writing can make may be leery of allocating dollars to improve skills that they don’t believe can be directly tied to achieving profitability or preventing disasters. They tend to favor initiatives that can produce tangible benefits, such as training in sales, software, and cybersecurity. For these decision makers, point out that enhanced writing abilities drive better results in productivity, employee engagement, new business development, and other areas. Bolster your case with findings from studies linking poor writing to poor outcomes (see “The Demand for Good Writing" in the introduction).

To better your chances for management approval, explain that you’ll develop viable methods to track the effectiveness of the training course, including follow-up surveys with participants and their supervisors and before-and-after evaluations of participants’ writing. You can also assess other measures of success, such as more-engaged employees (for leaders) and higher productivity, before and after the training course.

Design the Training Course

Even if you don’t work for a learning organization with a ton of resources, you can still design an effective learning program that produces measurable outcomes. Here are some key steps:

Establish Preliminary Goals

Clarify the desired outcomes, such as enhancing email productivity, building relationships with clients through professional messages, or establishing a more robust social media presence through compelling text.

Choose the Instructor(s)

Should you choose an in-house or outside instructor? First look at the expertise within your learning or HR department, especially experienced facilitators who may be familiar with the targeted employees’ strengths and weaknesses. If one of the in-house trainers has experience teaching writing, she could be an ideal choice.

Another resource is the corporate communications or public relations department, staffed by those whose job it is to write for the company. But keep in mind that being able to do and being able to teach are separate skills. Your ideal instructor should be able to do both. Also realize that you’re asking a person to take on an extra task on top of their regular workload. Will they be willing to put time into designing a learning program for employees in another department? It may take a senior leader to make it happen.

If in-house trainers aren’t available or if you don’t believe they bring enough expertise to teach business writing, then hire an outside instructor. Find them the same way you find other facilitators—through referrals, online searches, and the local chapter of ATD.

Ask the instructor candidates to submit information about themselves, along with references and links to their websites, LinkedIn profiles, and other forms of online presence. Plus, watch a sample presentation video, if they have one. Be sure to speak to the instructor candidates, either in person or over the phone, before signing a contract. An email won’t reveal a person’s commitment to success or willingness to tailor the course to the needs of the participants. Listen to how they come across and let your instincts tell you if they’re a good fit for your organization.

Develop Objectives

Work with the instructor to set specific objectives, building on your preliminary goals. For example, if you want the project management specialists to improve their email efficiency, one program objective would be to compose explicit emails that reduce the number of back-and-forth messages. Then you could compare the average number of emails to complete a task before and after the training to evaluate its success.

Tailor the Program to Participants’ Requirements

Collaborate with the instructor to develop a training course that pinpoints the employees’ needs. Start with a needs analysis that includes a review of participants’ writing samples and separate surveys for participants and their supervisors. Among the information to uncover about the learners:

toughest writing challenges

percentage of day spent writing

attitude toward writing—enjoy, tolerate or dislike

frequently written emails and documents

perceived proficiency in competencies such as grammar, brevity, flow, organization, tone, persuasion, and efficiency

expected outcomes from improved writing.

Work with the instructor to analyze the samples and survey results so you can design a program best suited to the participants’ needs.

Select Learning Delivery Methods

Today you can choose myriad learning options—including classroom, webinars, one-on-one coaching, online self-study, and mobile tutorials. Decide what method or combination of methods is most practical based on factors such as office locations, learner preference, and resources. If your budget is limited, consider enrolling employees in a writing course at a local college or registering them in online training. Be sure to preview the self-study courses and ensure they’ve been designed by a reputable business writing expert.

One-on-One Coaching

The ability to work privately with a coach—in a comfortable, nonthreatening environment—allows people at all levels to address their toughest writing challenges and often dramatically improve the quality of their typical emails and documents. These sessions are particularly valuable to “writing introverts” less likely to ask to talk about their writing in a group setting. In my writing workshops, usually with 15 to 20 people, only about a third of the participants frequently raise their hands, point out corrections to the intentional mistakes on the screen, or read their revised versions of exercises aloud.

You can incorporate one-on-one writing coaching sessions as a follow-up to a group workshop. Each participant could receive a designated number of 45- to 60-minute sessions, in person or over the phone, enabling them to practice skills learned in the workshop and to apply them to on-the-job emails and documents.

When a workshop is not offered, look at a dedicated coaching program of eight to 12 sessions for targeted employees. These private sessions, designed to achieve key objectives, could prove especially valuable to those struggling with their writing (including international professionals). Plus, managers at different levels could fuel their leadership prowess by learning to craft messages that demonstrate their ability to understand a problem or situation and recommend logical, easy-to-follow next steps. After the final coaching session, the instructor should develop a brief analysis that explains progress made, areas for improvement, and suggestions for ongoing self-study.

Executive Writing Coaching

As face-to-face meetings and phone calls give way to emails, texts, and other computer-mediated communication, C-suite executives are writing more messages than ever—to colleagues, direct reports, rank-and-file employees, clients, and others. This written communication often deals with critical and sensitive topics like shifts in corporate strategy, complex organizational changes, internal strife, and new initiatives.

Through dedicated one-on-one coaching, those in the C-suite can learn to compose these important messages in a way that demonstrates their leadership capabilities. These private, discreet programs could focus on skills such as engaging employees by tapping their hot buttons, using a productive tone when pointing out shortcomings, and conveying the company’s value to clients and prospects.

Build Sustainability Tools

To maximize benefits from a writing training program, offer options that enable participants to continue honing their skills after the workshops, webinars, and coaching sessions have concluded. Consider integrating microlearning tools like mobile tutorials that employees could easily access as needed. For example, a first-line manager who receives a harsh or condescending email could instantly access a two-minute video explaining how to compose a civil and appropriate reply. See if the instructor can provide tutorials that complement the learning delivered thus far.

Cultivate a Writing Culture

When a company and its leaders show that they understand how effective writing can drive success throughout the enterprise, this message filters down to managers and personnel at all levels. As a result, employees recognize their responsibility to upgrade their writing skills and recognize the support from those at the top:

Strategies for demonstrating that the organization values high-quality writing include:

Make writing one of the competencies measured in performance reviews.

Publish expectations about the quality of writing in the employee handbook, including the types of email and documents that should be mastered by those in certain positions.

Promote a collaborative writing atmosphere where co-workers review and critique each other’s drafts, and establish writing support groups.

Encourage employees to submit content to internal newsletters, social enterprise networks, and other internal communication channels—and reward authors of the best-written pieces with gifts, vacation time, or other incentives.

The best time to improve employees’ writing and truly foster a writing culture is when they’re first hired. By embedding writing training into a new employee onboarding program, the organization will help ensure that those in new positions enhance their writing proficiency, master frequently written emails and documents, and adhere to the company’s structure and format. Plus, these new hires will learn how to shape their writing to model the behavior and style the company expects.

Work with your internal or external instructor to design a writing program that would fit seamlessly into your existing onboarding process. The training could start with, for instance, a three-hour live workshop or webinar on core business writing skills, followed by self-study modules, one-on-one coaching, mobile tutorials, or other methods.

Develop a Writing Style Guide

One way to make employees immediately more comfortable with their writing is to create a style guide with guidelines for capitalization, expressing numbers, abbreviations, fonts, layout, and more. This way, nobody needs to waste time emailing a co-worker asking, “Should I capitalize procurement manager in my status update?”

Here are some rules your corporate style guide could include:

For numbers, spell out zero to nine, and use numerals for 10 and above.

Express numbers in the millions or higher in a decimal format ($7.5 million instead of $7,500,000). Naturally, financial reports with tables in which exact amounts are presented would be an exception to this rule.

For names, use both the given name and the surname on first reference; use the last name for all subsequent references. Avoid courtesy titles like Mr., Miss, Ms., or Mrs.

Write time in numeral format: 10 a.m., 7:30 p.m.

Use two-letter standard postal abbreviations for states (NY, CA, OH, and so forth).

To avoid reader confusion with acronyms, spell out the name or phrase the first time it is used and enclose the acronym in parentheses immediately following the spelled-out term. Here’s an example: Our industry needs to better understand the potential impact of artificial intelligence (AI).

Do not use all-caps type for the regular text portion of any document because it is more difficult to read.

Don’t capitalize generic titles such as division head or regional manager.

Use standard round bullets.

That list is far from exhaustive. Draft a guide that answers the needs of your employees and is pertinent to your most frequently written emails and documents. The guide shouldn’t drive employees crazy with seemingly insignificant rules; instead, it should help workers stop wasting time trying to decide whether to write Ms. Hunter or Hunter when drafting a meeting summary.

Treat the style guide as a living document, which should be updated periodically as new questions arise or new types of emails or documents become part of the corporate mix. One person or a team in the learning or HR department might be assigned the task of creating the new rules and continually updating the guide.

Also as part of the style guide, you can include document templates and boilerplate language for certain categories of emails and text messages. A template establishes the “look” of a document—the typefaces used for text and headlines, the margins, the layout for charts or tables, and so forth. Boilerplate language is standard wording that employees can access and update with data pertinent to the communication at hand. For example, an employee first would download the boilerplate language for an email to a customer acknowledging receipt of a complaint and the company’s next steps. Then they would plug in the complaint details, the solution details, and other pertinent information before sending the message.

Improve Your Writing

If you’re not part of the learning and development or human resource team and don’t oversee other workers (or even if you do), it may be time to improve your own writing skills. Start by envisioning what benefits would come your way as a stronger writer. These could range from a dynamic LinkedIn profile that helps you land a better job, a compelling new business proposals that generates leads, and robust social media posts that generate dialogue with key contacts. Or you may just want the personal satisfaction that comes from being a more proficient writer. The more clearly you can anticipate the payoff of better writing, the easier it will be to motivate yourself to do what it takes to achieve your objectives.

Then identify the skills (see the steps in this book) most important for you to master. You may just want a general refresher in several areas, to write faster with more confidence, or to persuade prospects to purchase your services. By pinpointing desired improvements, you’ll be able to develop a plan to achieve your goals. Below are some options:

Go solo—teach yourself to write better by going through each step in this book, completing the exercises and continuing to practice.

Find out if your organization plans to offer a business writing course in the next 12 months, and, if so, register.

Retain a writing coach who will analyze your challenges and goals and design a coaching program tailored to your requirements.

Enroll in a live or online writing course taught by a reputable writing instructor.

Complete a self-study business writing course suited to your needs from a well-respected provider.

Watch brief writing videos on topics related to your specific needs to help you sustain your skills.