Preface

“Nobody can write anymore!” That’s all I hear from executives, human resource managers, learning and development specialists, and others when I explain my profession as a corporate writing instructor and coach. And they’re right, based on many studies on the impact of poor writing in the workplace. According to the Los Angeles Business Journal, “Billions of dollars in lost productivity can be traced to employees who are not capable of writing clearly and concisely” (Killeen 2013).

Today, the need for effective business writing has never been greater. With the rising number of communication channels—social media, instant messaging, and whatever else is next—and the accelerating pace of business interaction, we’re writing more than ever. And what we say and how we say it can dramatically affect our careers and the success of organizations in which we work.

Whether it’s providing clear directions to direct reports, conveying bad news to a client, or posting a meaningful comment on social media, your writing needs to be concise, explicit, relevant, professional, well organized, and grammar-free. Plus, in many cases, your text must be captivating enough to break through the clutter and grab readers’ attention.

The good news is that business writing is a learned skill based on fundamental principles of communication. It doesn't matter how extensive your vocabulary is or what grades you received in high school or college English. If you can tap your natural ability to express your thoughts, first learned as a child, you can become an effective writer. This is the essence of business writing: Say it as simply as possible so the reader understands and takes the desired action. As you read the techniques, tools, and exercises in 10 Steps to Successful Business Writing, remember this simple—and powerful—statement.

Why a Second Edition?

Have the skills for successful business writing changed since the first edition was published in 2008? Not really; they’ve remained virtually identical for the past 75 years or more. But a few aspects have changed. The speed of business communication has accelerated, spurring a greater need for concise, clear, and compelling text—which must be written faster than ever. That puts added pressure on you to quickly crank out messages that achieve the desired results and demands an important talent: critical thinking on the go.

Moreover, the digital era seems to have spawned an attention-deficit disorder epidemic. Fewer and fewer people have the patience to read one paragraph after another. Everyone wants information in bite-sized chunks. So you need to master subject lines, titles, subheads, and bulleted text. Otherwise, your readers won’t pay attention to your message.

Today, everyone wants to be “social,” in their personal lives and in their work environments. Some organizations expect their employees to participate regularly in traditional social media forums like LinkedIn and their social enterprise networks, for various objectives. That means tough decisions: How do you start? Should you be edgy? How will audiences react to you? It goes back to critical thinking on the go.

Maybe the best reason for a second edition is all of you. Since the first edition came out in 2008, I’ve received so many valuable insights from readers; participants in my corporate writing workshops, coaching sessions, and college classes; and colleagues, friends, and family members. You’ve shared your toughest writing challenges, your most important takeaways from the book, and additional areas to address in this new edition.

So here are your 10 steps with the changes from the first edition:

Step 1: Get Started Easily and Naturally—updates the old step 2 (Know Where You’re Taking Your Readers)

Step 2: Be Concise, Explicit, and Clear—updates the old step 3 (Be Explicit, Clear, and Concise)

Step 3: Write With Style and Rhythm—updates the old step 5 (Write With Rhythm to Hold Your Readers)

Step 4: Organize to Promote Understanding—updates the old step 6 (Organize to Help Your Readers Understand)

Step 5: Persuade Readers to Take Your Desired Action—updates the old step 4 (Grab Your Readers’ Attention)

Step 6: Choose the Right Tone—updates the old step 7 (Choose a Tone That Produces Good Results)

Step 7: Put Your Best Grammar on the Page—updates the old step 8 (Put Your Best Grammar on the Page)

Step 8: Edit and Proofread Effectively—updates the old step 9 (Edit, Rewrite, and Refine)

Step 9: Master Emails and Electronic Communication—new step

Step 10: Apply Writing Skills to Social Media Copy—new step

Appendix A: Drive Organizational Success With Better Writing—updates the old appendix (Steps to Improve Workers’ Writing Skills)

Appendix B: Master the Text You Use Most Often—updates the old step 10 (Master the Documents You Use Most Often)

Acknowledgments

For me, taking on a major creative endeavor like writing a book is much easier with the support of people who care about me. A big thanks to Rosa, my wife; my younger daughter, Sarah; my older daughter, Gail, and her husband, Grayson; my granddaughter, Norah; and my mother-in-law, Lupe. Knowing that you were all behind me made all the difference in the world.

Writing a book is a team effort. And I couldn’t have done it without the shrewd advice and continual support I received from my team at ATD: Jack Harlow, Melissa Jones, Caroline Coppel, Ryan Changcoco, and Kristine Luecker. You made this challenging process more manageable—and a lot more fun!

Finally, I need to thank an individual no longer with us, Christine Cotting, my editor (from ATD) for the first edition of the book. With patience, compassion, and a zeal for excellence, she coached me through each step, explaining the nuances of writing effective copy. Christine, you’re sorely missed by me as well as countless authors, former colleagues, and others lucky enough to have known you.