Introduction

I’m frequently asked to identify the single most important quality for good business writing. My answer is always the same: simplicity. It’s what readers crave and what will get you the desired results. Yet it can be elusive.

If your text lacks simplicity, you may be overcomplicating your message, perhaps subconsciously. You may be trying to dazzle your reader with million-dollar words. Or you may be including superfluous information in an attempt to fully present an issue. Always go back to the essence of business writing—getting the reader to understand your message as quickly as possible.

Consider these advertising examples that illustrate the power of simplicity:

Around 1990, a major technology company aired a television commercial for its software consulting services that went something like this: One man (we’ll call him Bob) is rattling off complex technical jargon to explain to a colleague (let's call him Dave) why their firm should invest in a particular software application. Frustrated with this over-the-top language, Dave implores Bob to cut the technobabble and explain the purchase rationale in a way that management could understand. Bob pauses, reconsiders his initial choice of words, and says: “For every buck we invest, we’ll get back two.” So simple, so concise, so powerful.

Now, consider three iconic advertising slogans:

Nike: “Just do it.”

Subway: “Eat fresh.”

BMW: “The ultimate driving machine.”

These corporations recognize that their window in which to hook their audience is limited, whether at the end of a 30-second commercial or on a billboard along the side of the road. Competing for attention against other brands, not to mention countless other distractions, advertisers know that simplicity is the best way to get people’s attention and drive them to action.

But simplicity isn’t always easy to achieve—we often make it hard on ourselves by losing touch with the message’s essence. Take a look at these notifications I’ve come across while navigating my computer:

“Avsynmgr has caused an error in MCSCAN32DLL. The application will close.” Oh, I get it. I knew I should have paid more attention to my Avsynmgr.

“The instruction at OxSad715131 referenced memory at Ox0000019. The memory could not be found.” I knew it. I should’ve referenced that memory at Ox0000019 like I usually do.

“The application Windows Genuine Advantage Notification has changed since you first gave it access to the Internet. Do you still want to let it access the Internet?” I want to access the Internet and don't care if Windows Genuine Advantage Notification (whatever that is) can access it.

If you’re an information technology specialist, these messages may be perfectly clear to you—but not to me and the majority of laypeople who depend on computers and mobile devices. The software developers lost the essence of the message they were trying to convey with these alerts, and as a result, have hindered the users’ comprehension of what action they need to take. The good news is that over the past few years, technology and software companies have started to recognize that we need plain instructions—with no chance for misunderstanding. Thank you, Microsoft, for your brilliantly direct messages, such as, “Please do not turn off your computer when configuring Windows and installing updates.” Simplicity is a beautiful thing!

The Demand for Good Writing

Today, working professionals at all levels need to deliver information instantly and accurately to a wide array of discerning readers. Top executives insist that your email get to the point immediately. Prospective clients need your proposal to explain precisely what separates your firm from competitors. And managers, colleagues, suppliers, and everyone else needs text with clear rationale and explicit instructions.

But the quality of business writing continues to fall short of these requirements, based on my experience and observations over the past 20 years. Too many documents, emails, and text messages lack clarity and professionalism and ignore basic grammar rules. Poor writing is an epidemic spreading throughout the workplace. Check out these alarming statistics:

Bad writing costs American businesses close to $400 billion every year (Bernoff 2016).

Poor communication (including emails that don’t reach their audiences) is responsible for as much 40 percent of the cost of managing all business transactions (DuBay 2008).

Only 6 to 7 percent of emails receive a response (Mark, Voida, and Cardello 2012).

And to address these deficiencies, U.S. companies spend more than $3.1 billion annually on remedial writing training, including $2.9 million on existing, rather than new, employees (National Commission on Writing and CollegeBoard 2004).

Why Don't We Like to Write?

One reason cited for poor workplace writing is that it’s one of the least-favorite activities for many employees. For some, this aversion goes all the way back to elementary school, when writing was a dreaded assignment. Some teachers, instead of encouraging our creativity and allowing us to experiment with word construction, fixated on correctness—pointing out every last grammar and spelling mistake, slashing handwritten or typed papers with red ink. That’s no way to encourage people to write!

Then came high school and college English courses. Remember? Your 1,000-word essay is due tomorrow morning and you’re still 300 words short. You crank out some more sentences. You plug in some flowery new vocabulary words—even if you’re not sure what they mean—to impress the teacher. So what if you’re rephrasing ideas already written? Keep those words coming until you reach that magic 1,000.

What an agonizing way to write! Yet too many working professionals haven't let go of this “essay syndrome”—piling up words that don’t contribute meaning—and their writing suffers. For them, the consequence is far worse than a poor grade: People lose interest and stop reading their text.

I don’t mean to disparage English teachers, who play a critical role in teaching us fundamentals such as grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. As a business writer, you need to master these skills or risk embarrassing yourself before supervisors, clients, colleagues, and other key audiences. Still, I appeal to all teachers, from elementary school through college: stress clarity and brevity, the qualities your students will need when they write as working professionals.

Effective Writing Can Be Learned

My goal for you and everyone reading this book is to become a more confident writer. Start with the belief that you can significantly improve your writing by learning several easy-to-follow techniques.

One essential strategy is to stop trying to impress readers. You’re not completing an academic assignment and won’t be judged on the breadth of your vocabulary or whether you surpass a minimum number of words. Instead, you’re trying to convey your message in a straightforward, concise, and organized manner. Do that and you can become an effective business writer.

This goal is well within your reach; just follow the steps in this book. And pay more attention to how others write, everyone from authors and journalists to top executives, middle managers, colleagues, and direct reports. As a reader, notice what's well written and what's not, what's clear and what's confusing. Evaluate how effectively the information is presented to you—a process that will help you deliver clear messages to others.

The Payoff of Good Writing

In the corporate world, your documents, emails, and instant messages become your personal brand. Co-workers, clients, suppliers, and others form impressions about you based on your written words, which can convey enthusiasm, intelligence, and empathy and inspire others to action. These written messages can fuel your ability to be a more effective leader:

As a company head, you can shape the future of your organization.

As a senior executive, you can clarify complex sales or management strategies.

As a midlevel manager, you can demonstrate or underscore your leadership abilities to direct reports and supervisors.

Above all, as an employee at any level, well-written text can also show others that:

You understand all aspects of a situation and can clearly convey their relevance.

You understand how a problem affects various people and departments.

You can “manage up,” which includes helping a supervisor understand an issue and weigh potential solutions.

You know what steps others should take and why they should take them.

Inside This Book

This book has been designed for people at various levels of writing proficiency, ranging from those looking to polish their superior text to those who struggle to find the right words, including those for whom English is a second language.

If you’re looking for a book with extensive discussion on the philosophy of writing, audience analysis, readability matrixes, sentence diagrams, and endless grammar rules, this isn’t it. I didn’t have the patience to go into such detail—and you probably wouldn’t have had the patience to read it. Instead, this book is a short, practical guide, with the most important steps for taking your writing to the next level.

The skills are explained through examples, in which you’ll see the same message presented two ways, one less polished and one preferred. Then, in the “Your Turn” section at the end of each step, you’ll get a chance to complete exercises addressing these concepts. Here is a preview of how examples will be shown:

Too Many Words: Starting next year, our division will sponsor monthly social outings. These will be designed for the purpose of building camaraderie among all personnel, enabling employees to better know their fellow workers and create an atmosphere of trust.

Concise: Starting next year, our division will sponsor monthly social outings to help build camaraderie among the staff.

Much of the content in the book is based on my 20-plus years as a business writing instructor, writing coach, and professor. Feedback from employees and students I’ve taught (especially in the 10 years since the first edition was published) helped me identify common challenges and most desired competencies.

Here are your 10 steps to writing effective business text:

Step 1: Get Started Easily and Naturally. Unleash your innate abilities to communicate effectively. Break through writer’s block by answering a few simple questions that define your message. Then choose a method such as outlining or freewriting, and you’re on your way.

Step 2: Be Concise, Explicit, and Clear. Get to the point immediately with clarity and precision. Spare readers the murky swamp of vague terms, jargon, buzzwords, and stuffy phrases.

Step 3: Write With Style and Rhythm. With a professional and down-to-earth style, create a smooth flow of words and sentences. Insert transitions to unify your ideas so readers move easily through your message.

Step 4: Organize to Promote Understanding. Select the organizing method best suited for each document you create. Hold readers’ attention so they grasp your points. Start with the bottom line and arrange ideas in a logical order. Use tools such as subheads to separate sections and topic sentences to frame ideas.

Step 5: Persuade Readers to Take Your Desired Action. Push readers’ hot buttons, address their WIIFM (What’s it in for me?), and overcome their objections to win them over to your side. Strengthen your persuasive emails with active verbs and compelling language.

Step 6: Choose the Right Tone. Compose messages that convey professionalism, respect, and empathy. Avoid hidden insults, and reply civilly to rude emails or text messages. Fit your language and your attitude to each reader’s needs.

Step 7: Put Your Best Grammar on the Page. Use your common sense when following grammar rules. Avoid frequently made errors, and learn which old rules can be broken. Don’t expect perfection, but ensure that substandard grammar never muddles your message.

Step 8: Edit and Proofread Effectively. Put yourself in your readers’ shoes and refine your text until your gut tells you it’s ready. Then proofread it for clarity, organization, and mechanics.

Step 9: Master Emails and Electronic Communication. Enhance email efficiency with precise messages and clear next steps, avoiding excessive back-and-forth dialogue. Spur action with explicit subject lines. Practice proper etiquette for email and instant messaging to save time and to come across professionally.

Step 10: Apply Writing Skills to Social Media Copy. Tailor your writing to platforms such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter and to social enterprise networks within your organization. Speak one-on-one to your audience, and stop readers with engaging headlines. Ask intriguing questions, and post thoughtful replies that extend conversations.

Appendix A: Drive Organizational and Personal Success With Better Writing. Determine how the quality of writing affects productivity, profitability and engagement. Identify employees at all levels who need to upgrade their writing skills. Get management buy-in, and design a sustainable writing training program tailored to participants’ needs. Devise a plan to improve your own writing.

Appendix B: Master the Text You Use Most Often. Become adept at writing the kind of text you most frequently compose to save time and get better results. See how the 10 steps apply to these documents: performance review, audit report, proposal, email to irritated customer, presentation slides, project status report, press release, and LinkedIn profile summary.