16

Business Writing

Writing in Your Job

If you have to do any writing in your job, this chapter is for you. Just as in science writing, anxiety is a big part of the problem and humanity and clear thinking are a big part of the solution.

Although this is a book about writing, it's not just for writers. Its principles apply to everyone who is expected to do some writing as part of his or her daily employment. The memo, the business letter, the administrative report, the financial analysis, the marketing proposal, the note to the boss, the fax, the e-mail, the Post-it—all the pieces of paper that circulate through your office every day are forms of writing. Take them seriously. Countless careers rise or fall on the ability or the inability of employees to state a set of facts, summarize a meeting or present an idea coherently.

Most people work for institutions: businesses, banks, insurance firms, law firms, government agencies, school systems, non-profit organizations and other entities. Many of those people are managers whose writing goes out to the public: the president addressing the stockholders, the banker explaining a change in procedure, the school principal writing a newsletter to parents. Whoever they are, they tend to be so afraid of writing that their sentences lack all humanity—and so do their institutions. It's hard to imagine that these are real places where real men and women come to work every morning.

But just because people work for an institution, they don't have to write like one. Institutions can be warmed up. Administrators can be turned into human beings. Information can be imparted clearly and without pomposity. You only have to remember that readers identify with people, not with abstractions like "profitability," or with Latinate nouns like "utilization" and "implementation," or with inert constructions in which nobody can be visualized doing something: "pre-feasibility studies are in the paperwork stage."

Nobody has made the point better than George Orwell in his translation into modern bureaucratic fuzz of this famous verse from Ecclesiastes:

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.

Orwell's version goes:

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.

First notice how the two passages look. The first one at the top invites us to read it. The words are short and have air around them; they convey the rhythms of human speech. The second one is clotted with long words. It tells us instantly that a ponderous mind is at work. We don't want to go anywhere with a mind that expresses itself in such suffocating language. We don't even start to read.

Also notice what the two passages say. Gone from the second one are the short words and vivid images of everyday life—the race and the battle, the bread and the riches—and in their place have waddled the long and flabby nouns of generalized meaning. Gone is any sense of what one person did ("I returned") or what he realized ("saw") about one of life's central mysteries: the capriciousness of fate.

Let me illustrate how this disease infects the writing that most people do in their jobs. I'll use school principals as my first example, not because they are the worst offenders (they aren't) but because I happen to have such an example. My points, however, are intended for all the men and women who work in all the organizations where language has lost its humanity and nobody knows what the people in charge are talking about.

My encounter with the principals began when I got a call from Ernest B. Fleishman, superintendent of schools in Greenwich, Connecticut. "We'd like you to come and 'dejargonize' us," he said. "We don't think we can teach students to write unless all of us at the top of the school system clean up our own writing." He said he would send me some typical materials that had originated within the system. His idea was for me to analyze the writing and then conduct a workshop.

What appealed to me was the willingness of Dr. Fleishman and his colleagues to make themselves vulnerable; vulnerability has a strength of its own. We decided on a date, and soon a fat envelope arrived. It contained various internal memos and mimeographed newsletters that had been mailed to parents from the town's 16 elementary, junior and senior high schools.

The newsletters had a cheery and informal look. Obviously the system was making an effort to communicate warmly with its families. But even at first glance certain chilly phrases caught my eye ("prioritized evaluative procedures,"

"modified departmentalized schedule"), and one principal promised that his school would provide "enhanced positive learning environments." Just as obviously the system wasn't communicating as warmly as it thought it was.

I studied the principals' material and divided it into good and bad examples. On the appointed morning in Greenwich I found 40 principals and curriculum coordinators assembled and eager to learn. I told them I could only applaud them for submitting to a process that so threatened their identity. In the national clamor over why Johnny can't write, Dr. Fleishman was the first adult in my experience who admitted that youth has no monopoly on verbal sludge.

I told the principals that we want to think of the men and women who run our children's schools as people not unlike ourselves. We are suspicious of pretentiousness, of all the fad words that the social scientists have coined to avoid making themselves clear to ordinary mortals. I urged them to be natural. How we write and how we talk is how we define ourselves.

I asked them to listen to how they were defining themselves to the community. I had made copies of certain bad examples, changing the names of the schools and the principals. I explained that I would read some of the examples aloud. Later we would see if they could turn what they had written into plain English. This was my first example:

Dear Parent:

> We have established a special phone communication system to provide additional opportunities for parent input. During this year we will give added emphasis to the goal of communication and utilize a variety of means to accomplish this goal. Your inputs, from the unique position as a parent, will help us to plan and implement an educational plan that meets the needs of your child. An open dialogue, feedback and sharing of information between parents and teachers will enable us to work with your child in the most effective manner.
>
> DR. GEORGE B. JONES
> *Principal*

That's the kind of communication I don't want to receive, unique though my parent inputs might be. I want to be told that the school is going to make it easier for me to telephone the teachers and that they hope I'll call often to discuss how my children are getting along. Instead the parent gets junk: "special phone communication system," "added emphasis to the goal of communication," "plan and implement an educational plan." As for "open dialogue, feedback and sharing of information," they are three ways of saying the same thing.

Dr. Jones is clearly a man who means well, and his plan is one we all want: a chance to pick up the phone and tell the principal what a great kid Johnny is

despite that unfortunate incident in the playground last Tuesday. But Dr. Jones doesn't sound like a person I want to call. In fact, he doesn't sound like a person. His message could have been tapped out by a computer. He is squandering a rich resource: himself.

Another example I chose was a "Principal's Greeting" sent to parents at the start of the school year. It consisted of two paragraphs that were very different:

> Fundamentally, Foster is a good school. Pupils who require help in certain subjects or study skills areas are receiving special attention. In the school year ahead we seek to provide enhanced positive learning environments. Children, and staff, must work in an atmosphere that is conducive to learning. Wide varieties of instructional materials are needed. Careful attention to individual abilities and learning styles is required. Cooperation between school and home is extremely important to the learning process. All of us should be aware of desired educational objectives for every child.
>
> Keep informed about what is planned for our children this year and let us know about your own questions and about any special needs your child may have. I have met many of you in the first few weeks. Please continue to stop in to introduce yourself or to talk about Foster. I look forward to a very productive year for all of us.
>
> DR. RAY B. DAWSON
> *Principal*

In the second paragraph I'm being greeted by a person; in the first I'm hearing from an educator. I like the real Dr. Dawson of Paragraph 2. He talks in warm and comfortable phrases: "Keep informed," "let us know," "I have met," "Please continue," "I look forward."

By contrast, Educator Dawson of Paragraph 1 never uses "I" or even suggests a sense of "I." He falls back on the jargon of his profession, where he feels safe, not stopping to notice that he really isn't telling the parent anything. What are "study skills areas," and how do they differ from "subjects"? What are "enhanced positive learning environments," and how do they differ from "an atmosphere that is conducive to learning"? What are "wide varieties of instructional materials": pencils, textbooks, filmstrips? What exactly are "learning styles"? What "educational objectives" are "desired"?

The second paragraph, in short, is warm and personal; the other is pedantic and vague. That was a pattern I found repeatedly. Whenever the principals wrote to notify the parents of some human detail, they wrote with humanity:

> It seems that traffic is beginning to pile up again in front of the school. If you can possibly do so, please come to the rear of the school for your child at the end of the day.

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012

I would appreciate it if you would speak with your children about their behavior in the cafeteria. Many of you would be totally dismayed if you could observe the manners of your children while they are eating. Check occasionally to see if they owe money for lunch. Sometimes children are very slow in repaying.

But when the educators wrote to explain how they proposed to do their educating, they vanished without a trace:

In this document you will find the program goals and objectives that have been identified and prioritized. Evaluative procedures for the objectives were also established based on acceptable criteria.

Prior to the implementation of the above practice, students were given very little exposure to multiple choice questions. It is felt that the use of practice questions correlated to the unit that a student is presently studying has had an extremely positive effect as the test scores confirm.

After I had read various good and bad examples, the principals began to hear the difference between their true selves and their educator selves. The problem was how to close the gap. I recited my four articles of faith: clarity, simplicity, brevity and humanity. I explained about using active verbs and avoiding "concept nouns." I told them not to use the special vocabulary of education as a crutch; almost any subject can be made accessible in good English.

These were all basic tenets, but the principals wrote them down as if they had never heard them before—and maybe they hadn't, or at least not for many years. Perhaps that's why bureaucratic prose becomes so turgid, whatever the bureaucracy. Once an administrator rises to a certain level, nobody ever points out to him again the beauty of a simple declarative sentence, or shows him how his writing has become swollen with pompous generalizations.

Finally our workshop got down to work. I distributed my copies and asked the principals to rewrite the more knotty sentences. It was a grim moment. They had met the enemy for the first time. They scribbled on their pads and scratched out what they had scribbled. Some didn't write anything. Some crumpled their paper. They began to look like writers. An awful silence hung over the room, broken only by the crossing out of sentences and the crumpling of paper. They began to sound like writers.

As the day went on, they slowly relaxed. They began to write in the first person and to use active verbs. For a while they still couldn't loose their grip on long words and vague nouns ("parent communication response"). But gradually their sentences became human. When I asked them to tackle "Evaluative procedures for the objectives were also established based on acceptable criteria," one of them wrote: "At the end of the year we will evaluate our

progress." Another wrote: "We will see how well we have succeeded."

That's the kind of plain talk a parent wants. It's also what stockholders want from their corporation, what customers want from their bank, what the widow wants from the agency that's handling her social security. There is a deep yearning for human contact and a resentment of bombast. Recently I got a "Dear Customer" letter from the company that supplies my computer needs. It began: "Effective March 30 we will be migrating our end user order entry and supplies referral processing to a new telemarketing center." I finally figured out that they had a new 800 number and that the end user was me. Any organization that won't take the trouble to be both clear and personal in its writing will lose friends, customers and money. Let me put it another way for business executives: a shortfall will be experienced in anticipated profitability.

Here's an example of how companies throw away their humanity with pretentious language. It's a "customer bulletin" distributed by a major corporation. The sole purpose of a customer bulletin is to give helpful information to a customer. This one begins: "Companies are increasingly turning to capacity planning techniques to determine when future processing loads will exceed processing capabilities." That sentence is no favor to the customer; it's congealed with Orwellian nouns like "capacity" and "capabilities" that convey no procedures that a customer can picture. What *are* capacity planning techniques? Whose capacity is being planned? By whom? The second sentence says: "Capacity planning adds objectivity to the decision-making process." More dead nouns. The third sentence says: "Management is given enhanced decision participation in key areas of information system resources."

The customer has to stop after every sentence and translate it. The bulletin might as well be in Hungarian. He starts with the first sentence—the one about capacity planning techniques. Translated, that means "It helps to know when you're giving your computer more than it can handle." The second sentence —"Capacity planning adds objectivity to the decision-making process"—means you should know the facts before you decide. The third sentence—the one about enhanced decision participation—means "The more you know about your system, the better it will work." It could also mean several other things.

But the customer isn't going to keep translating. Soon he's going to look for another company. He thinks, "If these guys are so smart, why can't they tell me what they do? Maybe they're *not* so smart." The bulletin goes on to say that "for future cost avoidance, productivity has been enhanced." That seems to mean the product will be free—all costs have been avoided. Next the bulletin assures the customer that "the system is delivered with functionality." That means it works. I would hope so.

Finally, at the end, we get a glimmer of humanity. The writer of the bulletin asks a satisfied customer why he chose this system. The man says he chose it because of the company's reputation for service. He says: "A computer is like a sophisticated pencil. You don't care how it works, but if it breaks you want

someone there to fix it." Notice how refreshing that sentence is after all the garbage that preceded it: in its language (comfortable words), in its details that we can visualize (the pencil), and in its humanity. The writer has taken the coldness out of a technical process by relating it to an experience we're all familiar with: waiting for the repairman when something breaks. I'm reminded of a sign I saw in the New York subway that proves that even a huge municipal bureaucracy can talk to its constituents humanely: "If you ride the subway regularly you may have seen signs directing you to trains you've never heard of before. These are only new names for very familiar trains."

Still, plain talk will not be easily achieved in corporate America. Too much vanity is on the line. Managers at every level are prisoners of the notion that a simple style reflects a simple mind. Actually a simple style is the result of hard work and hard thinking; a muddled style reflects a muddled thinker or a person too arrogant, or too dumb, or too lazy to organize his thoughts. Remember that what you write is often the only chance you'll get to present yourself to someone whose business or money or good will you need. If what you write is ornate, or pompous, or fuzzy, that's how you'll be perceived. The reader has no other choice.

I learned about corporate America by venturing out into it, after Greenwich, to conduct workshops for some major corporations, which also asked to be dejargonized. "We don't even understand our own memos anymore," they told me. I worked with the men and women who write the vast amounts of material these companies generate for internal and external consumption. The internal material consists of house organs and newsletters whose purpose is to tell employees what's happening at their "facility" and to give them a sense of belonging. The external material includes the glossy magazines and annual reports that go to stockholders, the speeches delivered by executives, the releases sent to the press, and the consumer manuals that explain how the product works. I found almost all of it lacking in human juices and much of it impenetrable.

Typical of the sentences in the newsletters was this one:

> Announced concurrently with the above enhancements were changes to the System Support Program, a program product which operates in conjunction with the NCP. Among the additional functional enhancements are dynamic reconfiguration and inter-systems communications.

There's no joy for the writer in such work, and certainly none for the reader. It's language out of *Star Trek*, and if I were an employee I wouldn't be cheered—or informed—by these efforts to raise my morale. I would stop reading them. I told the corporate writers they had to find the people behind the fine achievements being described. "Go to the engineer who conceived the new system," I said, "or to the designer who designed it, or to the technician who

assembled it, and get them to tell you in their own words how the idea came to them, or how they put it together, or how it will be used by real people in the real world." The way to warm up any institution is to locate the missing "I." Remember: "I" is the most interesting element in any story.

The writers explained that they often did interview the engineer but couldn't get him to talk English. They showed me some typical quotes. The engineers spoke in an arcane language studded with acronyms ("Sub-system support is available only with VSAG or TNA"). I said that the writers had to keep going back to the engineer until he finally made himself intelligible. They said the engineer didn't *want* to be made intelligible: if he spoke too simply he would look like a jerk to his peers. I said that their responsibility was to the facts and to the reader, not to the vanity of the engineer. I urged them to believe in themselves as writers and not to relinquish control. They replied that this was easier said than done in hierarchical corporations, where approval of written reports is required at a succession of higher levels. I sensed an undercurrent of fear: do things the company way and don't risk your job trying to make the company human.

High executives were equally victimized by wanting to sound important. One corporation had a monthly newsletter to enable "management" to share its concerns with middle managers and lower employees. Prominent in every issue was a message of exhortation from the division vice-president, whom I'll call Thomas Bell. Judging by his monthly message, he was a pompous ass, saying nothing and saying it in inflated verbiage.

When I mentioned this, the writers said that Thomas Bell was actually a diffident man and a good executive. They pointed out that he doesn't write the message himself; it's written for him. I said that Mr. Bell was being done a disservice—that the writers should go to him every month (with a tape recorder, if necessary) and stay there until he talked about his concerns in the same language he would use when he got home and talked to Mrs. Bell.

What I realized was that most executives in America don't write what appears over their signature or what they say in their speeches. They have surrendered the qualities that make them unique. If they and their institutions seem cold, it's because they acquiesce in the process of being pumped up and dried out. Preoccupied with their high technology, they forget that some of the most powerful tools they possess—for good and for bad—are words.

If you work for an institution, whatever your job, whatever your level, be yourself when you write. You will stand out as a real person among the robots, and your example might even persuade Thomas Bell to write his own stuff.

Extract from Zinsser, W. On Writing Well. 30th Anniversary ed. New York: HarperCollins; 2012