Book The Truth About the New Rules of Business Writing

Natalie Canavor and Claire Meirowitz
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Recommendation

Some people believe good writing involves big words, long sentences and complicated concepts. Nothing could be further from the truth, explain Natalie Canavor and Claire Meirowitz, co-owners of a business writing consultancy and co-authors of this handy guide. That's why they spell out the tenets of effective business writing in 52 simple "truths," covering virtually every type of business communication, from emails, letters and reports to websites and blogs. Their message is that good writing is concise, engaging and accessible – much like human conversation. They warn that, in this day of information overload, your communications have to meet these criteria or no one will read them. Though their writing advice is not particularly groundbreaking, Canavor and Meirowitz offer a clear, comprehensive, easy-to-use manual. *BooksInShort* predicts that their guide will quickly become a well-thumbed resource.

Take-Aways

* To become a strong business writer, first learn to recognize bad writing.
* Make a list of the writing traits you dislike, then "reverse them," or find their antonyms, to create a list of positive words. This becomes your definition of good writing.
* Always "write the way you speak," using clear, concise, simple language.
* Begin by asking yourself, "What am I trying to accomplish with this piece of writing?"
* Then complete eight more steps: consider the reader, choose a mood and form, "map" the content, arrange it, write a lead, draft the middle, prepare an ending and edit.
* Everything you write reflects on who you are, so apply this nine-step process to all your writing projects, from brief emails to detailed reports.
* Let your writing objective and audience shape what you say and how you say it.
* When you want the reader to act on something, open and close with your request.
* While email is an effective way to communicate material "with an immediate purpose," letters suit many formal situations. They are also great relationship builders.
* When writing for the web, remember that "viewers" make up your audience, not "readers." Present information in "chunks" to aid scanning.

Summary

Write Right

Writing well is an essential career skill. Good writing adds to your credibility and professionalism and enhances your reputation and image. To get ahead in business, you need all your written communications to work, whether you are trying to inform, persuade or collaborate. The numerous, varied vehicles available for sending your message share one requirement: Whether you are crafting an email, a white paper, a blog post or advertising copy, you must write in a way that achieves your desired outcome.

> "Most people write carelessly, using old-fashioned, outdated styles that are ill suited to today's tempo and spirit."

To become a strong business writer, first learn to recognize bad writing. Make a list of the habits and traits that really irk you as a reader. Then "take your list of negatives and reverse them," or find their antonyms. If you wrote "boring," counter it with "interesting," and if you wrote "ambiguous," match it with "clear." The resulting pool of positive words is your definition of good writing and provides a checklist to consult every time your fingers hit the keyboard.

"What Makes Writing Work"

Long before humans wrote, they engaged in "oral storytelling." In fact, many classics, such as those by Geoffrey Chaucer and Homer, began as spoken word. Now, conversational language is making a comeback in business communications. The new dictum: "Write the way you speak." Be clear and direct, so readers understand your message. Use concise language and short paragraphs, and let your ideas flow smoothly. Give your writing the "say-ability" test. When you read it aloud, it should sound unaffected and natural. No one would turn to a co-worker and say, "The amount of human interaction in contemporary office contexts is continually diminishing, because of technology." But someone might comment, "Today businesspeople don't talk to each other very much; we mostly send emails." Using a conversational tone in your writing allows you to convey a thing or two about your personality which is a huge asset when "substituting for an in-person interaction."

Planning: "The Magic Ingredient"

Everything you write, from simple emails to professional reports, reflects on who you are. Don't let one sloppy proposal or slapdash missive hurt your reputation. Once you've formed your definition of good writing, hold yourself accountable for using it. Apply this nine-step method:

Step 1: "Identify Your Goal"

Before writing anything, ask yourself, "Exactly what am I trying to accomplish with this piece?" Always "look below the surface" to see your underlying objectives. Say, for example, you want to send an email to invite colleagues to an award ceremony in your honor. At first glance, you might think your intention is to provide information about the event. But upon deeper reflection, you may realize that attaining recognition and forging better relationships with your co-workers are your larger goals.

Step 2: "Think About Your Audience"

Next, consider the recipients of your communication. Know what matters to them and what their viewpoints are. Then you can structure your message to answer their primary question, "What's in it for me?" Make your writing relevant to them so they'll care about what you have to say.

Step 3: "Determine the Right Tone and Format"

Although you want your writing style to be conversational, you still need to decide the tone of your message. Should it be cheerful or grave, intimate or professional? The answers depend on your audience and your objective. But always be wary of "emotional content, criticism and humor."

Step 4: "Map the Content"

In this "thinking-through stage," ask yourself what you need to say to attain your goal, keeping your targeted readers in mind. If you are inviting your boss, your employee and your colleague to a meeting, you may need to brainstorm for three versions of the same memo to address each person's interests. When tackling a more in-depth piece of writing, jot down all the items you need to cover.

Step 5: "Organize in a Way that Works for Your Purpose"

Take time to arrange the information you generated in the mapping stage. Use an organizational method that suits you. Some enjoy making a master content list and then arranging it in a logical order. Others color-code or highlight content to prioritize what is of most importance. Various software programs can also help you with this step.

Step 6: "Begin with a Strong Lead"

Journalists know that a compelling lead, the opening sentence or paragraph, is the most important element of any writing project. It should grab readers' attention, set the tone and make them want more. Craft a lead that says how your topic is relevant to readers, why it matters in general and what action you want readers to take.

Step 7: "Write the Middle, Quickly"

The body of your communication, or the middle, holds all the content. Don't agonize over this part of your project; just rapidly put your thoughts on paper, using your content lists as a guide. Then go back and edit for meaning, grammar, spelling and flow, ensuring that you haven't omitted anything.

Step 8: "Build Your Conclusion"

Your ending must reiterate your main ideas and, as any good salesperson will tell you, include "the ask," or what you want the reader to do. However, when you would like the reader to act on something, don't wait until the conclusion to say so. In that case, it's "better to ask twice," in both the opening and the closing of your communication.

> "Good business writing today is very close to good spoken language. So, if you can say it...you can write it."

Step 9: "Read What you've Written and Evaluate, Cut, Fix, Tighten and Sharpen" Always edit your work, from the briefest emails to lengthy reports. Commit to the axiom "Everything you write is a first draft." People find it easier to read short, basic words, so keep your words to one or two syllables whenever possible. For example, use "start" instead of "initiate," "help" instead of "facilitate," and "also" instead of "additionally." Limit your sentences to 12 to 15 words, and use only three to five sentences per paragraph. Employ transitions, such as "while, although, however, nevertheless, because and moreover," to add rhythm and flow. The more concise your writing, the better chance you'll have of someone reading it in its entirety. Prune redundancies and repetition, unnecessary adjectives and adverbs, and any word that doesn't add to your message. Rewrite sentences that use inactive verbs. Rather than "The road was crossed by the chicken," write "The chicken crossed the

road." Shun acronyms and jargon, which are easy to misinterpret. Spell out what you want to say in common terms.

> "Almost always in business writing, put the bottom line on top."

Your writing objective and audience should also shape how you ultimately communicate your message, whether in an email, a letter or a report, or on a website.

"Communicate in the Fast Lane – Powerfully"

Email messages are a great way to invite a co-worker to lunch, send a quick reminder or provide a brief progress report. They're "best when they're short, to the point," and "written with an immediate purpose." Your emails may be your chief vehicle for making an impression on your bosses, co-workers, subordinates and customers, so always apply the principles of good business writing before you click Send. Also heed these email dos and don'ts:

- Do open with a captivating subject line. This functions as a lead for your content.
- Do "put the bottom line on top," that is, state the purpose of the email at the start.
- Do make emails brief and succinct, and stick to one subject.
- Do use readable text.
- Do include the ask at the end.
- Don't write long emails that require the reader to scroll.
- Don't use fancy colors, graphics or typeface.
- Don't put something in an email that you wouldn't say in person.

"Letters: They Live!"

Even though email has replaced letters in many contexts, they are still appropriate in certain situations, particularly formal ones. Letters are a good medium when you are asking for an interview or appointment, thanking people for their time or attention, resigning from a job, or submitting a proposal or grant. Since they can be more personal than email, letters are great relationship builders. The art of letter writing is especially important when constructing a cover letter. A well-written cover letter often gets you through the first screening in the hiring process. When writing business letters, try to include some information of personal interest to the recipient – for example, mention a mutual friend or colleague. Always keep in mind that letters, like emails, are a permanent record of your communication.

Business Staples: Reports and Proposals

From project summaries and survey recommendations to committee wrap-ups and budget analyses, reports are the meat and potatoes of many organizations. They play the crucial role of telling those in charge what's happening and what needs to be done. Thus, report writing is a vital business skill. Generally, reports follow a set format: They begin by introducing the subject and explaining the reason for the report, then move on to the content. Some reports describe the research, activity or process under discussion and conclude with a list of suggestions. The best reports keep readers' attention and motivate them to take action.

> "You can't communicate successfully if the message doesn't reach the receiver in his or her own language and terms."

Proposals differ from reports in that the objective is to win business. Strong proposals show your expertise and vast knowledge about the client company and the project. They cover all the crucial details about how your firm will complete the work – "time frame, staffing, resources" – and provide background information on the key people you will assign to it. Explain the benefits your business offers, and gain the client's trust by presenting proof of your company's integrity, including your fees and schedules, as well as a company résumé.

Writing for Cyberspace

When writing for the web, remember that "viewers" make up your audience, not "readers." Don't approach online content as you would traditional material. Website visitors scan and choose what text they want to peruse, so keep your writing tight and bare-bones. Present information in stand-alone "chunks of content." Your message must be obvious and self-explanatory. If viewers struggle to decipher it, one click allows them to exit your site.

> "Provide something of real value, and you'll be found."

Consider the graphic design of your website. Is it consistent? Does it provide continuity from one subject to the next, and between the menu and the pages? And what about navigation? Do you offer links to guide viewers through your site or to relevant outside sources? Build in several paths to the same information so that visitors can find it easily. Update your site constantly; edit and proofread it ruthlessly. Avoid cute copy, excessive graphics or attempts at humor.

> "Blogs go where no marketing department can venture: directly to customers, prospects, supporters, critics and complainers."

The explosion of social media and blogs has permanently changed how people gather information. Whether you are promoting your business or simply looking to express yourself, understand what works – and what doesn't – in the blogosphere. First, have something relevant to say. Focus on subjects you know about and are comfortable explaining. Find your own unique voice. Maintain a conversational tone, but follow the rules of grammar and punctuation. Create tantalizing headlines that reel in an audience, then keep people engaged by asking questions and encouraging their comments.

> "The less space you have to deliver your message, the better and clearer your thinking has to be."

When building a company blog, maximize your online presence by publishing updates about your business "instantly," or as events occur. This will make followers of your blog feel they're getting "inside information." Urge all staffers to write their own posts, even if they use the venue to voice criticism about the firm. Your blog is also a great way to connect to your customers. Request their feedback, and ask them how they would improve your product or service. Don't let their blog comments – or complaints – go unanswered.

About the Authors

Natalie Canavor and **Claire Meirowitz** co-own C&M Business Writing Services. Canavor has written for *The New York Times* and *Newsday*. Meirowitz is a long-established editor and award-winning author.