

12 Tips for Improving Your Business Writing

Communication Featured

By Dustin Wax

Today's business world is almost entirely information-driven. Whether you run a small business or occupy a small corner of the org-chart at a massive multinational corporation, chances are that the bulk of your job consists of communicating with others, most often in writing. Of course there's email and the traditional business letter, but most business people are also called on to write presentations, memos, proposals, business requirements, training materials, promotional copy, grant proposals, and a wide range of other documents.

Why? and How? For example, who is this memo relevant to, what should they know, when and where will it apply, why is it important, and how should they use this information? Use the 5W+H formula to try to anticipate any questions your readers might ask, too.

9. Call to action.

The content of documents that are simply informative are rarely retained very well. Most business communication is meant to achieve some purpose, so make sure they include a call to action – something that the reader is expected to do. Even better, something the reader should do right now. **Don't leave it to your readers to decide what to do with whatever information you've provided** – most won't even bother, and enough of the ones who do will get it wrong that you'll have a mess on your hands before too long.

10. Don't give too many choices.

Ideally, don't give any. If you're looking to set a time for a meeting, give a single time and ask them to confirm or present a different time. At most, give two options and ask them to pick one. **Too many choices often leads to decision paralysis, which generally isn't the desired effect.**

11. What's in it for your readers?

A cornerstone of effective writing is describing benefits, not features. Why should a reader care? For example, nobody cares that Windows 7 can run in 64-bit mode – what they care about is that it can handle more memory and thus run faster than the 32-bit operating system. 64-bits is a feature; letting me get my work done more quickly is the benefit. **Benefits engage readers, since they're naturally most concerned with finding out how they can make their lives easier or better.**

12. Hire a freelancer.

Not a writing tip per se, I know, but good advice nonetheless. **Writing is most likely not your strong suit – if it's important, hire someone for whom writing is their strong suit.** You may think freelancers are only for marketing material, but that's not true – a good freelance writer can produce memos, training manuals, internal letters, corporate newsletters, blog posts, wiki entries, and just about any other kind of writing you can think of. Depending on your needs, you can farm work out as needed or move a freelancer into a cubicle on-site, or work out whatever other arrangements best fit your needs.

Expect to pay at least \$30 an hour, and more likely \$50 – \$125 an hour, for good writing – anyone who charges less is either not very good, or not very business savvy. (These rates are for writers in US metro areas – rates may differ in other parts of the world.) Great writing may require a talent that few of us have, but effective writing is a learnable skill.

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