

Write to the Top: Writing for Corporate Success

By Deborah Dumaine

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Now reorganized into an easy-to-follow, six step approach to effective writing for every business communication format.

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Editorial Review

From the Inside Flap
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Writing Can Make or Break Your Career

Most of us dread writing in some way

Tom LeBlanc glances at his watch and then back at the empty screen in front of him. The ticking of the wall clock grows louder, and a siren outside the window makes him lose his train of thought for the second time. The right words are just beyond his reach.

His mind wanders to the next day's appointments and to the movie he is going to see with Elaine that evening. A ringing telephone brings his attention back to the memo he wants to write. "I'm just not getting anywhere," he thinks. "I know pretty much what I want to say, but I can't get those first words out."

Tom stands, straightens up his desk, and wonders if a cup of coffee will wake him up. "Maybe I'll just let it go until tomorrow," he mutters.

An enormous percentage of the people we work with tell us that they regularly feel the way this manager does. Whether writing a long report or a short memo, they find themselves staring at the blank page or screen more often than they'd care to admit. At those times the process can seem so overwhelming that many will do anything to avoid getting started.

Writers get into this trouble because most of them were not taught an effective, step-by-step approach to writing. They were often told, with bright red pen, what they were doing wrong, but few teachers ever said, "Write this way!"

Convenient distractions

In the office there are many distractions: the phone rings, an associate drops by, or there's e-mail to check. Here is a list of obstacles to writing mentioned by participants in a

Better Communications(r) business-writing workshop:

-I need to clean my desk before I can start writing.

-I can't find the time to do my job and write this proposal, too.

-My manager called a special meeting.

-No matter what I write, it will be ripped to shreds.

-I don't understand why they want me to put this in writing.

-I need to check my messages first.

For those who dread beginning or who are embarrassed about their skills, almost any other activity will win out over writing.

Our mass-media society sabotages good writing skills

These days it's easy to communicate with a minimum of writing. The Internet gives us business information, news, and entertainment. Family, friends, and business associates are a phone call away. E-mail barely counts as writing anymore-much to the detriment of clear communication. People read dramatically fewer books than they did 50 years ago, and it shows. As we read less fiction or nonfiction, we are becoming far less comfortable with the written word.

No wonder many people say that writing is the part of their job they like the least. In fact, most of them would probably be happy to see other methods of communication replace writing completely.

Today's biggest writing challenges

Our clients tell us that they are faced with several challenges that they are aware of. After listing these, we'll add a couple they may not be aware of.

No time

The first and most daunting task most businesspeople climbing the corporate ladder experience is the need to write twice as quickly as perhaps five years ago. In a company that has experienced downsizing, these people must be able to do a job that two or three did in the past. If they are slowed down by their writing responsibilities, their daily success and possibly their careers will suffer.

The good news: This book has a solution that works for improving writing efficiency. At Better Communications we measure the writing productivity of over 4,000 graduates each year-and all report writing 30 to 50 percent faster after taking one of our workshops!

Writer's block

The inability to get started can have many causes: not knowing who your readers are or how to approach them, lacking a clear vision of where you want to go with your message, negative past experiences that shook your confidence.

The good news: There are many more causes of writer's block, but our strategies will help you overcome them all. According to our graduates, even years after one of our workshops, their start-up speed keeps improving.

Constant interruptions

It's frequently impossible even to reply to an e-mail without three phone calls and two drop-ins slowing you down. This, on top of the two challenges we have already discussed, can grind you to a halt.

The good news: This book offers several step-by-step processes that can guide you through writing any type of document, from the simplest e-mail to the most complex of presentations. If you are interrupted in Step 3, it's all right. You can go back anytime, finish that step, and move on to Step 4. You always know where you are in the writing process and what to do next.

It's Hard to persuade and influence

There are specific techniques for convincing readers that your ideas are the right ones. Some are simple-good for quick e-mails, for example. Others guide you through the process of constructing persuasive arguments built on inductive logic. These arguments can be inserted into more than one type of document.

The good news: You can find strategies for influence and persuasion in this book.

Building your professional image-and your career

There are two challenges of which corporate writers are often blissfully unaware. The first is professional image, how you are perceived by your managers and peers. We are constantly surprised at how many corporate writers, especially emerging ones, don't understand that their casual "instant messaging" approach to business e-mail is doing them a grave disservice. They just don't believe that taking the time to write a professional-sounding e-mail makes a difference. Managers, however, are constantly telling us that they judge others negatively for this failure. Indeed, managers doubt other aspects of their coworkers' skills when they receive careless, error-filled e-mail.

Second, if you work in a large company and are known only on e-mail, you face the challenge of how to differentiate yourself and advance your career. With the ever-greater use of phone and Internet conferencing, many meeting participants have never met one another. Do you judge others a bit harshly if they send you a messy e-mail riddled with errors? Are you sure that yours don't look the same? Do you take the time to use spell check and grammar check?

The good news: "Energize Your E-mail" in Part 4 will help you avoid these all-too-common errors. Part 5 focuses on the rigors of editing and lets you quiz yourself to see how much you already know.

Writing skills will always be vital to business success

Most businesspeople we meet are not happy with their writing skills. On top of this, they spend hours reading and replying to ever more e-mails a day. They must make decisions about graphics and page layout-tasks that are alien to most. No matter how technological the workplace may become, real power will still have its source in the written word.

Good writing skills are in demand by employers. Skill in writing correlates highly with the ability to think well-to analyze information, weigh alternatives, and make decisions. Writing ability is also one of the core competencies necessary to climb the corporate ladder. Our experience consulting with executives verifies that, these days, no one gets to the top without being able to write well.

Why business documents fail

No matter what the topic, most of the writing we coaches and editors see suffers from one major flaw: it is written more from the writer's point of view than from an angle that will appeal to the reader. One of the greatest challenges to writers is to get outside of their personal interests to present their ideas in a way that

will answer every reader's four biggest questions:

1.What's this about?

2.Why should I read this?

3.What's in this for me?

4.What am I being asked to do?

We will be explaining more about reader-centered writing and how to achieve it as we go through "Six Steps to Reader-Centered Writing(r)," "Writing Presentation Documents”," "Challenges of Persuasion," and "Action Through Words." You'll see how the reader-centered approach will make your writing more persuasive and help you achieve the results you want.

Why use a process?

How do efficient writers write? Some seem to have a natural flair, while others develop the skill through practice. Most of the participants in our writing workshops confirm that their writing improves when they begin to look at it as a manageable process, rather than as an irritating chore. How can you make this shift in attitude? By breaking the writing task into its components.

The different steps we offer for various types of documents make efficient writing easy to learn. Using a systematic approach, you can always pick up where you left off in the process, even after an unexpected interruption. This is an especially important skill if you're working on more than one document at a time.

A writing process benefits the writer in surprising ways

One manager wrote a long document developing an idea for a new business direction. As he worked his way through the writing process, he changed his mind about the value of pursuing the new approach and actually recommended aborting the project. "The writing process helped me see the facts more objectively," he told us. Because he had been so emotionally tied to his great idea, he wasn't able to think it through clearly until he systematically approached the task of writing it down.

Writing is thought on paper, a tool for creating and organizing ideas. When writers transfer random ideas from the brain to paper, they begin to understand their own thoughts better. As they continue the process and develop a polished document, they refine their ideas.

Why the emphasis on Reader-Centered Writing?

We've seen people with superb writing skills get poor or apathetic responses from their readers. Why? They were too caught up in their own agenda to put themselves in their readers' shoes. Perhaps they said too much or too little, but whatever the reason, they lost their audience. One of the biggest complaints we get from readers of poor documents is "I don't know what she wants from me."

The phrase "I understand where you're coming from" became popular because communicators of every sophistication level discovered that being other-oriented is the key to getting a message across. Many people practice this technique in oral communication but fail to apply it effectively to the written word.

Here, then, is an outline of the professional business writer's process. The good news: 80 percent of our workshop graduates report that they have cut their writing time by one third. As measured by our assessment tools, the quality of their documents has improved an average of 110 percent. The response from their readership is equally enthusiastic: because documents in Write to the Top(r) style communicate twice as quickly, these readers estimate a 50 percent time savings.

So, are you ready to begin?

It's easy to know why to write. The challenge is knowing how to reach out to your readers and how to write efficiently. To start, we recommend Six Steps to Reader-Centered Writing for your day-to-day documents, including important e-mail. It's as easy as 1, 2, 3 . . . 4, 5, 6!

Step 1: Analyze Your Audience and Define Your Purpose

When you start a letter or e-mail message, you are starting a relationship; you will need cooperation and agreement from the reader for the relationship to work. It's best to begin by knowing what you want and by understanding what the other person expects. The more you consider your reader, the better your chances of getting the response you desire.

Complete the Focus Sheet

To start this relationship, create a reader profile. Although you may not know your readers personally, use your experience to answer some basic questions about who they are and what you want to communicate. The following Focus Sheet will help you clarify what you intend to accomplish with your memo, letter, or report and will keep your writing on target. Use the Focus Sheet to begin every writing project.

How to answer the questions

By answering the questions on the Focus Sheet, you've started planning your document. You are bringing it into focus. Each question is directed at a specific issue that you must analyze as you prepare your document. For example, understanding

-the reader's role determines your tone

-what your reader knows about the subject determines content and vocabulary

-how the reader will use the document influences the format you choose.

Let's look at each of the four Focus Sheet areas in detail.

Purpose

What are some of your typical reasons for writing? Here are a few:

to persuadeto analyz eto explain

to requestto motivate to recommend

to present findings to respond to praise

to solve a problem to propose to announce

Notice that "to inform" does not appear on this list. Very few documents are strictly for the purpose of imparting information. Usually, you want to persuade the reader to act, or at least to agree with you. If you think you are writing to inform, take a second look. Ask yourself if you've analyzed your purpose carefully enough. It should drive action on the part of the reader. This is the reason that the Focus Sheet asks "What do I want the reader to do?"

Your purpose should be strategic, not informational. For example, are you writing to inform your manager about your group's progress? Maybe. But isn't your primary purpose really to convince your manager that she can be confident in your leadership?

Make sure you have a strong statement of purpose that drives the action you want-even if it's only a change in attitude.

Audience

In analyzing your audience, consider such questions as:

-Is my audience likely to be receptive, indifferent, or resistant?

-If there are several readers, will their reactions differ?

-How technical can I be?

-What cultural issues could affect this message? For example, do I have a global audience?

-Should I soft-pedal the request, or should I be assertive?

Bottom line

What is the one message you want the reader to remember? The sooner you can boil it down to one or two sentences, the easier it will be to write. If you are having trouble stating your bottom line, continue with the process, then return to this question after Step 2.

The bottom line is often more subtle than you would expect. For example, when you are announcing a meeting, the bottom line is probably not "I'm holding a meeting." It's more likely to be "This meeting is vital to the success of our project!" Don't always go with your first idea.

So what? Why is it important for the reader to take action? And what are the risks of not taking action? The "so what?" will drive home the importance of your bottom line.

Strategy

Timing is essential. Should you send it today? In a week? You might defeat your purpose if you submit a controversial proposal an hour before the vice president leaves for a vacation. Or you could be helping your cause if you present it shortly after the vice president has received praise for his trend-setting management techniques.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Jeffrey Barclay:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have a lot more or little spare time? Sure, you can choose the suitable activity to get spend your time. Any person spent their very own spare time to take a go walking, shopping, or went to the Mall. How about open or perhaps read a book titled Write to the Top: Writing for Corporate Success? Maybe it is to be best activity for you. You already know beside you can spend your time along with your favorite's book, you can better than before. Do you agree with their opinion or you have other opinion?

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