

4 Quick Tips to Improve Your Business Writing

 hbr.org/2020/03/4-quick-tips-to-improve-your-business-writing

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March 18, 2020

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March 18, 2020



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Summary.

Whether you are an entrepreneur eager for funding, or a mid-level manager whose life is lived on email, strong professional writing is essential to accelerating your impact. To make sure your writing is reaching your audience, whether it's your colleagues, your boss, or your direct reports, do these four things. First, make sure the most important information is shared first. Then, use active verbs throughout your document. Avoid jargon. And finally, know what your readers care about. These tips will help your readers understand— and maybe even look forward to— your writing.

Whether you are an entrepreneur eager for funding, or a mid-level manager whose life is lived on email, strong professional writing is essential to accelerating your impact. But professional writing is not easy. At the Harvard Kennedy School, where I teach writing, I see professionals struggle every day with writing that is confusing, long-winded, and unclear. Fortunately, the way to improve is simple: Good writing focuses only what your audience needs. Nothing more.

For many of us who learned how to write in college—where our writing was about showing how smart we were or how well we knew the material—putting the audience first takes practice. You can start by making it easier for your reader to find your main point by sharing important information first; bring it up higher in sentences, paragraphs, and documents. It may feel awkward to write this way, but in the professional space your audience is busy. Move the bottom line upfront.

Another way to demonstrate empathy for your audience is to be brief. Are your sentences four lines long? Cut them down. You can also improve your brevity, and clarity, by writing in an active voice. Academic writing is passive, whereas empathetic professional writing is active. You can assess how passive your writing is by looking for some frequently used mis-hits, words like “being,” “not” and “has been.” Once you find those words, rewrite sentences to be present tense and active. This won’t work all the time, but it often does, and when you rewrite those sentences, you will make your piece shorter.

Also, be sure to write inclusively and not exclusively. Your boss (the intended audience) may know all of your used terms and acronyms but what happens when she sends your email about a potential new hire along to Human Resources and they are left out of your jargon? You could end up miscommunication, or even worse, hiring the wrong person. Always write for a “smart novice audience” – an audience that is smart, generally, but doesn’t know what you are referring to, specifically. Avoid acronyms and define all terms; you don’t want readers to feel stupid if they don’t know one, or make someone leave the report or email to look something up. They may not come back.

Finally, if you know your audience well, your writing will be better. But if you don’t, be sure to learn about them. If they are a busy superintendent of schools, and early education (your topic) is low on their list, be brief. If they are a Parliamentarian who claims to care about human rights but has not put interest into practice, find the one or two items of compelling data that will influence them, and nothing more. If they are a city council member interested in advocating for more open green spaces, but worry about losing parking funding, provide reassurances from other cities. In other words, dig in on what your audience knows, cares about, and fears, and write to that point.

This shift, to what I call “audience-centric writing,” takes time and effort. You need to learn to revise for active voice, cut down words, and simplify. But mostly it is a shift of mindset; because good professional writing is empathetic to readers. And this type of writing is more apt to be read and, by extension, create the change the writer desires.

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