

Let's Keep in Touch: Lessons for Business Writing

A fundamental task of every business is to communicate with customers and prospects. This may take the form of educational or sales information (newsletter, brochure, direct mail marketing material, advertising, sales letter) or may be central to the business's products and services (technical manual, instructions for use, specifications sheet). In either case, the effectiveness of the writing is crucial in persuading people to buy or helping people understand. In this paper, we will present some methods for improving your business writing skills so your information will be read and kept. We'll be emphasizing general writing skills, including grammar, punctuation, spelling and style, as this is applicable no matter what your writing task.



Expository versus persuasive writing

Most businesses need to master two kinds of writing skills: *expository*, meaning writing that has as its primary goal to present information on a topic; and *persuasive*, writing that is intended to lead the audience to form an opinion and take an action. Educational and technical writing is an example of *exposition*; sales-related material is an example of *persuasion*.

Even though there is a difference in focus between expository and persuasive writing, both share some common characteristics:

- a focus on the audience
- the benefits that will accrue to the user
- credibility
- a call to action

A basic requirement of all business writing is to understand the audience – who exactly the written material is intended for. The audience affects many decisions about writing style including the reading and comprehension level (*i.e.*, can be understood by someone with an eighth grade reading level); voice (active or passive); person (first or third; singular or plural); and vocabulary.

As the reader progresses through the written material, he must quickly come to understand what benefit will be derived from continuing to read. In persuasive writing, this concept is often illustrated by reminding writers to translate product features into customer benefits. Though not as obvious, it is also important in technical writing to gain and hold the reader's interest by providing a benefit: keep reading and you'll know how to operate the equipment or perform the task.

In both expository and persuasive writing, the reader must be certain about the credibility of the business offering the product or service. For technical writing, this can be accomplished with a statement of corporate capabilities or qualifications; for sales-related material it occurs through logically-developed and believable statements of differentiation.

Finally, all business writing needs to include a *call to action* – a specific set of instructions to the reader of what to do next.

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Balancing facts and creativity

There is a natural tension between writing copy that is technically accurate and writing copy that is persuasive. Particularly when developing a brochure describing a technically sophisticated product, a copywriter may be faced with competing demands from the technical and sales staff.

A company's technical staff may prefer to have the brochure filled with facts, details, and conditional statements, citing the need for full disclosure and honesty in representing the product. Simultaneously, the sales staff may prefer to present the product in the most appealing way, leaving the explanation of details and exceptions to the actual selling process. A third tension may come into play when copywriters and graphic designers develop a creative design or a clever or humorous play on words that is not congruent with the intended audience or the product itself.

The way to resolve these conflicts is to fully define the topic of the written material. Is its purpose to present a solution? Describe a product or service? Introduce a new concept? Illustrate a new use or application for the product or service? When the technical staff can define the topic and the sales staff understands the audience, then the creative staff can design effective materials.

The answer lies in discussing three major topics: the audience, the product, and the company offering the product. Of these, the company is the least important. Because the prospect is primarily interested in solving a problem or filling a need, the copy must first discuss the product and how it relates to the prospect's problems and needs. Company manufacturing capability, delivery and after-sale service is of secondary importance.

The role of style in business writing

All business writers need to be familiar with the best-known guide to American English writing: *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. Often referred to as *Strunk and White*, the book was first written in 1918 by Cornell University professor William Strunk Jr. In 43 pages, Strunk presented guidelines for "cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English."

Following Strunk's death in 1946, Macmillan and Company commissioned the American writer, poet and *New Yorker* columnist E.B. White to revise the book. His revision was published in 1959; two more followed (in 1972 and 1979).

The fourth edition appeared in 1999 (after White's death) and contained a foreword by White's stepson Roger Angell, a glossary, and an index; and editing by an anonymous editor. The most recent release (2005) is based on the 1999 text with added design and illustration.

The original edition contained eight elementary rules of usage, ten elementary principles for composition, "a few matters of form" and a list of commonly misused words and expressions. In the 1959 edition, E.B. White updated and extended these sections, and added an essay and a concluding chapter called *An Approach to Style*.

The Elements of Style remains the most popular and often-required guide to proper use of American English. A small book of only 105 pages, it is available in paperback or hardcover at most bookstores or online. We heartily recommend it to all business writers.

