

Business Writing Tips

Brush up on your business writing skills to create more effective business proposals, budget requests, e-mails, and other communications.

Tip: Get Organized by Listing Your Reader's Questions

When you're wondering what to cover in a message, how to organize your thoughts, and what to leave in and out, forget about what you have to say. Instead think about your reader: What does your reader want to know? What are your reader's questions?

Now, one by one, write the answers to your reader's questions. For example, here's what you might write when announcing a meeting:

Why are we meeting? We are meeting to decide whether to hire a part-time permanent employee or a summer intern to work on the winter marketing campaign.

When is it? The meeting takes place on Monday, April 25, at 2 p.m. for no more than 45 minutes.

Tip: Be Positive

If you want to get an affirmative response from your readers, try these tips for focusing on the positive.

State what to do—not what to avoid.

- > Yes: Always process orders within two days.
- > No: Never take more than two days to process an order.

Say what you can do—not what you can't do.

- > Yes: We can meet first thing Monday morning.
- > No: We can't meet now. It has to wait until Monday morning.

Use neutral rather than blaming language.

- > Yes: Let me clarify what I meant.
- > No: You misunderstood what I said.

Use words that create a positive feeling.

- > Yes: At this company we value natural resources.
- > No: At this company we don't waste natural resources.

Take every opportunity to communicate positively.

- > Yes: Thank you for your letter.
- > No: We have received your letter.

Tip: Know Where Passive Verbs Belong

There is a lot of good advice about limiting the use of passive verbs. For instance, we are told to change: "The surface should be primed" (passive) to "Prime the surface" (active).

This change makes sense. Readers need precise instructions.

"Your gift is appreciated" (passive) to "We appreciate your gift" (active). This is another fine suggestion. "Is appreciated" sounds impersonal, whereas "We appreciate" feels warm. When we make these changes, we are replacing wordy, vague phrases with concise, direct words.

But there are four places where passive verbs fit just right:

When you don't know who performed the action.

- Passive: Her car was stolen twice.
- Not: Someone stole her car twice.

When it doesn't matter who performs the action.

- Passive: The boards are pre-cut.
- Not: A worker pre-cuts the boards.

When we want to avoid blaming someone.

- Passive: The drawings were lost.
- Not: Andy lost the drawings.

When we want to soften a directive.

- Passive: This paragraph could be shortened.
- Not: Shorten this paragraph.

Passive verbs are perfect in these four instances. Know where passives verbs belong, and you won't be intimidated by your grammar-check software again.

Tip: Do More With Less

By cutting down on extra words, we cut down on both writing and reading time.

The paragraph below contains 70 words. Can you cut it down to 35 words or less?

This document is for the purpose of giving the reader a detailed explanation of the inventory process. It describes the activities we currently do in the majority of instances on a daily and weekly basis. In order to provide an introduction to the process for employees who work on a temporary basis, we also have prepared an overview, which describes the highlights of the inventory process in just two pages.

Here is a 30-word revision.

This document explains the inventory process in detail. It describes our usual daily and weekly activities. We also have prepared a two-page overview to introduce the process to temporary employees.

Which paragraph above is clearer—the 70-word version or the 30-word revision?

To lighten up your sentences, watch for heavy phrases like these:

- > for the purpose of = for
- > the majority of = most
- > in order to = to
- > provide an introduction = introduce
- > on a daily basis = daily
- > on a regular basis = routinely

Do you think you can do more with less? Try this experiment: When you finish writing a paragraph or a page, imagine it needs to be one-third shorter because of space constraints. Then see how many words you can cut. You'll probably be surprised about the excess baggage your sentences are carrying.

Tip: Break Through Writer's Block

Every now and then we get stuck. The blank screen or empty page just stares at us dully.

Need to break through writer's block? Here are a few techniques:

- > Imagine that you are talking with your reader. Think about the things your reader wants or needs to hear. Then "tell" (write) any part—beginning, middle, or end. Don't worry about the perfect opening.
- > Write without censoring yourself. Pay no attention to whether the writing is good. Just let the words and ideas flow. Then choose your "keepers" and build from them.
- > Review some of your past writing that makes you feel proud. This look will build your confidence and may give you specific ideas.
- > Talk with coworkers. Don't wait until you're done to tell about your struggles. The screen is blank now.

- > For a project that takes several sittings, end a sitting when you know what comes next, and make a note of it. That way, you won't face a mental block when you begin the next time. (This idea is courtesy of Ernest Hemingway.)
- > Take a break that includes a change of scenery, or shift to another activity.
- > When you're stuck near the end of a piece and have covered everything, quit. ☺

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