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Effective Business Writing:

*Strategies
and Suggestions*

*A guide for those
who write on
the job*

Original Title—*Re: Writing*



Maryann V. Piotrowski

Effective Business Writing

STRATEGIES AND SUGGESTIONS



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HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York
Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Francisco
London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto

A hardcover edition of this book was originally published in 1989 by Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., under the title *Re: Writing*.

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First PERENNIAL LIBRARY edition published 1990.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Piotrowski, Maryann V.

[Re : writing]

Effective business writing : strategies and suggestions / Maryann V. Piotrowski.
p. cm.

Reprint. Originally published: Re : writing. New York : Harper & Row, c1989.
Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-06-091972-8

1. Business writing. I. Title.

[HF5718.3.P56 1990]

808'.066651—dc20

89-46220

90 91 92 93 94 CC/FG 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

*To the memory of my father,
and to my mother and brother*

Acknowledgments (appreciating)

Writing is a lonely activity. I was never truly alone, however. My family and friends were always there for me—encouraging and cheering me on. They were also patient. When they asked, “How is the book coming along?” they listened politely as I described—sometimes at great length—the book’s progress. I wish to thank them all.

Special thanks to Barbara Swartz, Anne McDonald, Lee Warren, Jennifer Presley, Sandy Nickel, Dan Daniels, and Jennifer Mapes, who read and reacted to sections of the book. Special thanks also to Roger Richards, who read the book at every stage of its progress. His sound advice and quick wit helped me write, revise, and retain my good humor. Thanks also to Loretta Caira, the fastest typist in all New England.

Finally, I’d like to thank William Zinsser for his interest and encouragement and Buz Wyeth, executive editor of Harper & Row, for his support and suggestions.

Preface

If you were asked what job-related tasks you most dislike, would “writing” be on your list? If so, you are not unusual. Many others who work in industry, the public sector, and the professions openly admit to a dislike of writing. Besides “hating” writing—to use the word they use—these writers say they spend too much time writing, and, when they finally send out a document, neither they, their bosses, nor their readers find it effective.

Yet you, like others, realize that the ability to write well is an important skill—and one that brings you great visibility. Just as you judge others by their writing, so too others judge you by your writing. The memos, letters, and reports you write provide powerful evidence of your overall competence and of your management style.

This book can help you improve your writing. It focuses on issues many business writers find troublesome. You can read this book from cover to cover or you can use it as a reference book; it is organized so that you can easily look up specific topics.

This book is a distillation of what I’ve learned about business writing from several different perspectives: as a junior execu-

tive in banking and finance; as a writing instructor at Harvard Business School and at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management; as a writer and editor of the newsletter *Re: Writing*, from which this book evolved; and as a communication consultant to such clients as Time, Inc., Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company, General Cinema, Dupont NEN Products, and the U.S. Civil Service Commission, among others.

I hope that this book will help you become a more competent and more confident writer.

—MARYANN V. PIOTROWSKI
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Effective Business Writing

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Bad Writing Is Bad for Business

Efficiently run businesses cannot tolerate inefficient memos, letters, and reports. Business stops, or is slowed, as a result of poor communication. Orders don't get delivered or they don't get delivered on time; tasks don't get done, or they don't get done correctly. Productivity decreases while labor and supervisory costs increase. The morale of employees suffers, as does the image of the firm.

William J. Gallagher, who was for many years Manager of Communication Services at Arthur D. Little, Inc., has estimated that up to 30 percent of letters and memos in industry and government do nothing more than seek clarification of earlier correspondence or respond to that request for clarification. That estimate does not include the thousands of letters and memos that are not acted upon because they are not understood. Bad writing is bad for business.

Most people in business—employers and employees alike—agree that writing skills are weak. Some of the causes for poor writing clearly stem from a lack of instruction, or poor instruction, in our schools. But many of the causes have little to do with schooling itself; rather, they emanate from attitudes held by the writers themselves or from limitations prevalent in the workplace.

Some Causes of Poor Writing

One or more of the following causes may contribute to poor writing:

Ignoring the reader. Readers today want as much information as possible in as little time as possible. They want to know instantly what a piece of writing is about, and they want to understand it after one careful but quick reading. Writers who ignore their readers, sometimes quite unconsciously, do so by giving too much, too little, or the wrong kind of information. They use specialized vocabulary; their style is dense or bureaucratic.

A lack of professional pride. Some writers do not consider writing to be a part of their professional duties; therefore, they are unwilling to give it the time and discipline it requires. They are bankers, chemists, accountants, or marketing managers—not writers. Writing is a nuisance to them.

A lack of confidence. Some writers lack confidence in their ability to write so they rely on the file cabinet to do their writing. They find several letters in the files and by borrowing paragraphs, moving around sentences, and changing words, they put together a “new” letter, but one that is, nonetheless, unclear.

Inexperience. Since much business is conducted over the phone, at meetings, and in casual conversations, some writers lack experience. Even though they may have learned basic writing skills in school, they have not had sufficient exposure to, or practice in, writing for business. The style of academic writing is quite different from that of business writing.

Writing for the wrong reason. Some writers write to impress others, not to express themselves. They think that they will not

appear educated or knowledgeable unless they dip every word in gold, unless they embroider every sentence. Some of these writers are simply insecure. They camouflage their ideas lest they be attacked. Others are unseasoned. They do not yet realize that top executives do not need to adopt airs.

Strict requirements. Some writers do not write well because their bosses set strict requirements. One boss may demand what he or she is used to: "That's the way we've done it for years." Another may set limits: "I won't read anything over a page long." If it were not for these requirements, the written product could be far better.

Understanding the causes may help both employees and their employers identify the factors that may be contributing to bad business writing. Once the causes have been identified, remedies may suggest themselves.

Writing Is an Essential Skill

In many cases, doing business today demands that employees routinely learn new skills. When there are so many new skills to learn, is it really so important to master such a basic skill as writing? Yes, it is. The ability to write well is—and will continue to be—an essential business skill, especially in the new information society.

In their book *Re-Inventing the Corporation*, John Naisbett and Patricia Aburdene submit that "the more information we have, the more we need to be competent thinkers." Hand in hand with the ability to think is the ability to write. While men and women in business must keep up with the times and learn the many new skills that will give them access to greater information, they must also master the skills that will enable them to use and communicate this information. In fact, Naisbett and

Aburdene, among others, foresee a revival in writing instruction.

At the same time that many graduate business schools began requiring students to take computer courses, they also began requiring students to take courses in written and oral communication. Today the top-tier business schools—at Harvard, Stanford, Dartmouth, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, New York University, Carnegie-Mellon, Cornell, and The University of Pennsylvania, among others—include communication courses in their curricula. Managing well means communicating well.

Writing is an important skill on the job and in life. As William Zinsser, writer, editor, and teacher points out in his book *Writing to Learn*, "Far too many Americans are prevented from doing useful work because they have never learned to express themselves. Contrary to general belief, writing is not something that only 'writers' do; writing is a basic skill for getting through life."

The workplace is very much a part of life, and writing is very much a part of the workplace. The ability to write well—clearly, concisely, and precisely—should not be considered an ancillary skill; it should be considered an essential skill. Good writing is good for business.

Getting Started

Gaining Control

When a writing deadline approaches, or when a client or superior says, "Get it to me by tomorrow," you simply must get started. First you have to gain control of yourself. Then you have to gain control of your topic.

Gaining control of yourself requires that you put your mind and energy to the task. You may have to subdue the panic that the time pressure and the difficulty of the task impose, or you may have to circumvent your own clever procrastination rituals.

Getting started might mean that you need to think more, or it might mean that you need only close the door, have your calls answered, and begin writing. Whatever it takes to discipline yourself, do it.

You'll also have to gain control of your ego. You may come to a subject with knowledge and opinions that differ from those of your reader, yet egocentrism may keep you from seriously considering the other person's point of view. Being aware of your reader's perspective will help you avoid false starts.

Gaining control of your topic means nothing more than
prospect

defining the task. Until you know what you have to do, you cannot begin doing it. The following methodical approach might help you overcome inertia and focus on the task. Ask yourself these questions:

- PURPOSE:** Am I writing to inquire, inform, persuade, motivate, or do I have more than one purpose?
Besides writing to convey my thoughts, do I have some personal or political agenda? To go on record? To protect myself? To gain visibility?
- SCOPE:** Given my needs and my readers' needs, how much information should I include?
- CONTENTS:** What kinds of information will help me achieve my purpose?
Do I have all the information I need?
How, or where, can I get additional information?
- CONSTRAINTS:** What can work against me, or make my task more difficult? Time or cost constraints? My reader's attitudes? My own lack of credibility?

By answering questions like these, your task will become less amorphous, more concrete. As you gain control and get involved in the task, your lethargy will fade and your energy will build.

Seeing the Message Through Your Reader's Eyes

Put yourself in your reader's place and look at the world, and your message, through that person's eyes. This simple tech-