WORD POWER
MAKES THE
DIFFERENCE!

BY WILLIAM C. PAXSON

THE BUSINESS WRITING HANDBOOK

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO WRITTEN COMMUNICATION FOR PEOPLE IN BUSINESS, GOVERNMENT, AND THE PROFESSIONS

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PREFACE

This book presents basic guidance that will help you organize and write clear and effective letters, memos, reports, proposals, technical documents, and more. These types of writing are often brought together under the term *business writing,* a collective name used to describe writing done in private industry, the professions, and government. The book is planned for the business writer who is by training or vocation an engineer, mechanic, economist, clerk, doctor, secretary, manager, executive—any specialty other than that of professional writer.

The book concentrates on the essentials of business writing and is designed to be used by the writer in frequently encountered situations on the job. It will also serve as a text for college level and adult education classes that bear titles such as Business Correspondence or Writing for Industry.

My qualifications for writing this book are derived from a career that dates back to 1966. I began not as a professional writer but as a navigation instructor who was pressed into service to write training manuals. I later acquired a master's degree in English and eventually advanced into the dual careers of editing and teaching business writing.

Along the way, I learned that business writing is at once like and unlike all other forms of writing. The similarity exists in that the purpose of all writing is the same: Inform the reader. The reader's needs are paramount, and these needs demand that we use the right word, strive for clarity of statement, and organize statements logically. The difference exists because the business writer seldom has the luxury of specializing. The novelist can become immersed for months in one long project, and the reporter can enjoy an endless variety of short pieces. But a business writer is responsible for reports and letters and memos, of

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varying lengths and complexities, and tables and charts and graphs. All of this must be done within the budget and before the deadline and while accomplishing a variety of other tasks.

This book is designed to help business writers cope with these similarities and differences.

You will find the book useful in whatever pattern you read it. I urge you, however, to read Section I first. Section I covers some important material about the chief character of this book: the reader. Section I also gives some suggestions about organizing and managing the task of writing. After you have finished Section I, you may pick and choose as you wish, read the book in order, or scout around in the table of contents or index for topics of interest.

Section II offers discussions and examples of the different types of business writing: letters, memos, reports, proposals, resumés, news releases, and technical writing. The examples are from the writings of successful business communicators in a variety of professions.

Section III takes on the inner mechanics of writing, the grammar and usage necessary for accurate communication. Here you will find help with picking the right word, using verbs, writing sentences and paragraphs, tying thoughts together, and punctuating your writing.

A short section (Section IV) on editing comes next. The purpose of this section is to show how to convert a rough draft into final form.

These instructions are followed by Section V, which is about the special areas of visual aids, nondiscriminatory writing, the business writer and the law, documentation, and library research. For your convenience, lists of useful publications are placed near the end of the book. One such list is in the section on library research. The other list makes up the bibliography.

Throughout, I have tried to simplify instructions as much as possible in order to make the book easy to use. The result is a general approach that will work in most cases. Still, the principles set forth here cannot possibly cover all situations, and the wise writer who has mastered these general rules will know how to handle the exceptions.

Lastly, the reading of a book on writing is but a beginning step in becoming a writer. The intermediate and final steps are a continuing mixture of hard work and practice: writing and rewriting and critical analysis and often more rewriting and editing. The work that goes into good writing makes it a solid record of what has been said or done. And writing does have the advantage of being available so that it can be edited and rewritten. The spoken word does not have these advantages.

But writing is a doubly hard form of communication because of the nature of the printed word. The printed word does not have gestures to help it. The printed word does not, like the speaker, go back and forth over difficult points. The printed word does not answer spur-of-the-moment questions. Therefore, for you and me as writers to make the printed word work, *we* have to do the work.

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I.

BEFORE WRITING

Polonius:
    What do you read, my lord?
Hamlet:
    Words, words, words.
Shakespeare (*Hamlet*)

Most readers are in trouble about half the time.
E. B. White (William Strunk, Jr.,
and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*)

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I-A.

THE PROBLEM OF AUDIENCE

KNOWING THE READER

Teachers and editors spend hours lecturing writers on the need to aim for a particular reader. In high school and college writing classes, the reader is often described as "a student or teacher on this campus." Article writers study magazine styles and advertising to learn about readers' tastes and education. Novelists define their readers in terms of tastes (such as literary or popular) and genres (such as romance, western, and science fiction).

But writers in government and industry often sit at their desks pondering just who is going to read a report or a letter. We often do not have the easy task of writing for a known, narrow audience. Twin dangers exist. We can write too simply, which is not usually the case. Or we can write in a style that is so complex and gobbledygooked that no one understands us—and that is all too often the case.

As a step toward knowing our audience, let's consider the reader to be one or a combination of the following types: general public, expert-layman, or decision maker.

General public. Often you can consider your reader to have the reading level of the general public. If you take this approach, keep in mind that reading levels have been steadily declining over the past decade. You may be writing to someone who has a reading problem. You may also find that some of your readers are not native users of English. They will find it rough going in a swarm of complex constructions and long, twisted sentences.

Expert-layman. Each of us is an expert, but only in a certain field. In other fields, we become laymen. In any company or bureaucracy there are experts in your field. These same experts become laymen, however, when they are required to read material out of their fields.

Consider this example. If you are a soil scientist writing a report for another soil scientist, you are one expert writing to another expert: Use the vocabulary that you are both familiar with. However, if you are a soil scientist writing a report that will be read by your company's attorneys, you are writing for laymen. In this case, you will have to find a common vocabulary (or send a long a copy of the code).

It is safest to assume that laymen will read your report. It is also reasonable to assume that you will not have time to prepare two reports, one for the expert and one for the layman. Plan accordingly, and pick language that will work for the layman.

Decision maker. Perhaps your most important reader is the decision maker. The decision maker is often referred to as a manager. Other descriptive terms are: officer or executive in government, industry, or the military; congressman, senator, or cabinet member; activist, environmentalist, or lobbyist; the sole proprietor of a small business, the partners in a fashion boutique, the dairy farmer down the road, the family doctor, and more.

Good writing helps make decisions, and decision makers want to read writing that will help them act without wasting time. It is the decision maker who determines how many people are to be hired or fired and how the money is to be spent or how the budget is to be cut. To be of service to the decision maker, the writer must write in terms that are easily understood and arrange the message for easy reading and easy use.

WRITING FOR THE READER

Your reader needs to be informed, as quickly as possible, as accurately as possible. What can you do to help?

Have thoughts worth putting into print. Nothing is more important than solid content. Begin by asking yourself these questions. Should your message be written or orally presented? Is it worth presenting at all? Does some other document already cover it? Next, narrow the topic. Make this your goal: Do less and do it better. Finally, stay on the track; don't digress or ramble.

Use appropriate language. Appropriate language is plain language. Plain language is made up of the simplest word to do the job, the shortest sentence to express an idea, the briefest paragraph to explain a topic. Plain language is the language of conversation, of friendship. Plain language is direct.

To write plain language, begin by choosing the right word. Use simple words, because simple words are most easily understood.

Still, you have to use your own judgment, for the simplest word is not always the most accurate. As an example, the words *head cold* are used to refer to a minor ailment that is accompanied by a variety of uncomfortable symptoms. One of these symptoms is *rhinitis*—an inflammation of the mucus membranes of the nose. To most of us, *head cold* describes how we feel. To the doctor, however, *rhinitis* is a more accurate term.

Also, use words that cater to your audience's specific interest. Here's what I mean. I once reviewed a report in which the first sentence contained these words: "ships, boats, and their appurtenances." The report was written for sailors and operators of drydocks and shipyards. Now, seagoing folk are a proud, feisty bunch. They call a spar a spar and a boom a boom. They talk about fittings, hardware, masts, and lines—all kinds of specialized terms. But *appurtenances?* That's a lawyer's word. The writer who used it in that report lost a lot of credibility in the very first sentence.

Another ingredient of plain and appropriate language is the short sentence. In your writing, it's best to aim for an *average* sentence length of 15 to 20 words. A sentence is a unit of thought, and readers can grasp your thoughts better if you present them in short bursts. And don't worry about insulting your reader's intelligence. Short sentences make the reader's task easier, and no reader will get mad at you for making things easier.

Appropriate language also consists of headings, transitions, and paragraph topic sentences. These tell the reader where you've been, where you are, and where you're going. They tie thoughts together and smooth out the bumps.

And appropriate language also uses frequent visual aids—tables, charts, graphs, and illustrations. These add variety and can explain far more than words.

Pick the best format. *Format* means the organizational pattern of a piece of writing, the arrangement of the parts. In most types of business writing, the best format states the main idea early.

Of course, that advice is easy to say but often hard to follow, for one or a combination of reasons. First, a new or a timid writer often approaches the subject by backing into it. Second, it is very possible when you write to get totally wrapped up in what you consider important. When you do that, you may not recognize what is important from the reader's point of view. Third, college and high school composition classes stress what I call the building-block format.

The building-block format follows the form of inductive reasoning. In inductive reasoning, you gather evidence to establish a conclusion; you use known data to arrive at a new principle. When we use inductive reasoning, we follow this example:

Observation 1: The car parked by the fire hydrant has been there for several days.

Observation 2: Parking tickets are under the car's windshield wipers.

Observation 3: A thick layer of dust covers the car.

Observation 4: The car has a flat tire.

Conclusion: The car parked by the fire hydrant is an abandoned car.

Each observation by itself cannot lead us to a satisfactory conclusion, but by reasoning inductively, we can combine the observations to eventually develop a conclusion.

Inductive reasoning is an excellent way of thinking, and it helps put solid thought content into writing.

Nevertheless, formats that literally follow the inductive or building-block pattern are mystery stories. The story begins, the plot unfolds, details add up, the action rises to a climax, and finally, after two or three hundred pages, we know whodunit.

That's great for entertainment, for spicing up the odd hours of our spare time.

But the readers of business writing are on company time, not spare time. We demand to know on page one whodunit.

So the way to deal with this problem is to flip the story over. Write it down in the order that led you to your conclusions and then move your conclusions up to the front where they can most quickly serve the reader. In other words:

> [Conclusion] The car parked by the fire hydrant is abandoned. [Observations] It's been there for several days, is covered with a thick layer of dust, and has several parking tickets and a flat tire.

If you have a problem doing this, try adopting the conversational approach to writing. This approach is based on the idea that you should talk to the reader as if both of you are face to face.

The conversational approach works something like this. Suppose you are inviting friends to a party. You'd more than likely say, "C'mon over. We're having a party Friday night at my place." You'd then mention a few more items like the time and what to bring and what to wear. But you probably wouldn't name the number of things you're doing to get yourself and your place ready for the party. Or if you did, you'd save them until after you'd extended the invitation. The natural ability to get to an important point quickly when we talk should be used when we write.

It sounds simple. It is. But as an editor and teacher I spend a large amount of my time moving important ideas from the end of the letter to the front, from the bottom of the paragraph to the top, as in this sample:

> Dear . . . :
>
> Yours of January 12, 1978, received and contents noted. In your letter you are asking for three copies of our report #25A, entitled ". . ." and a list of people who attended our December workshop.
>
> Please be advised that the report was prepared by . . . of the Research Division. Copies of the report are distributed free to any citizen interested in the environment. To date the report has had wide circulation here and abroad. Our December workshop was well attended with people coming from as far as Rome.
>
> Because you indicated an interest in these documents, I am enclosing the material you requested.

If the writer had talked to the reader, the letter would have opened like this:

> Dear . . . :
>
> Here is the material you asked for in your letter of January 12, 1978.

Necessary details could have followed that opener. However, in the interests of saving time for writer and reader, a better approach might be to let the enclosed material speak for itself.

Later chapters give more advice on picking the best format. That advice can be summarized here in these statements:

1. Separate what you learned from how you learned it. In other words, separate conclusions from methodology. Give conclusions first, then methodology.
2. Use the "Did you know?" technique. "Did you know what I learned from the financial statement?" "Did you know what I learned at the pre-trial hearing?" "Did you know what I learned from the latest series of photochemistry experiments?" Answer those questions first. Then tell how you got the answer.

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