

“... Ellen Roddick’s book is full of sound advice.”
—Edwin Newman

WRITING THAT MEANS BUSINESS

A MANAGER’S GUIDE

HOW TO GET YOUR MESSAGE ACROSS
WITH LESS EFFORT AND GREATER IMPACT

ELLEN RODDICK

Ellen Roddick

*Writing That
Means Business:
A Manager's Guide*

How to get your message across
with less effort and greater impact

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What You Write Speaks for You— and About You

For most people in offices, hard copy is the only evidence of ever having done anything. Unless you can be measured directly by profit-and-loss standards, what else do you have to show for all those days in the office?

*Geraldine Henze
Director of Communications Programming
Graduate School of Business
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This book is designed to help you improve your writing. Language is a tool. Properly handled, it enables you to communicate your ideas to readers without significant loss of meaning or intention during transmission.

Clear and persuasive letters, memos, and reports will make a good impression on your business associates. If you increase the effectiveness of your writing, you will sharpen your competitive edge.

Colleagues—both inside and outside your organization—may form their impressions of you solely or primarily from what you write. Senior management, for instance, increases its familiarity with middle management in this way. Senior executives prefer writing from subordinates that does not have to be rewritten.

Alfred Sloan, the legendary chief executive officer of General Motors, provides an example of how business acumen may be enhanced by strong, convincing writing. Early in his career at GM, he wrote "Organization Study," a memo describing his ideas about decentralization as the key to success for the company. The memo ultimately convinced the board of directors that Sloan could run GM—which he did with great success as CEO from 1923 to 1946.

The General Electric Company's leaflet, *Why Study English*,* states:

Every day in your future you will be called upon to speak and write, and when you open your mouth or write a letter or report, you will be advertising your progress and your potential worth.

Not all self-advertising is positive. To illustrate what can happen when managers write thoughtlessly, here are some derailed idioms and metaphors that have been taken from actual business communications.

* As quoted in Courtland L. Bovee, *Business Writing Workshop* (San Diego, Calif.: Roxbury Publishing Co., 1980), p. 58.

It's mañana from heaven.

He makes reports with the seat of his pants.

We're not giving up by any shake of the imagination.

That's driving her up a skull.

The softening of orders has finally come to roost.

He really lowered the timber on him.

Look into this in a much closer vein.

Insurance rates are dropping like flies.

Don't run off at the handle like a stuck cow.

We'll really have to polish the lily.

They're chewing the breeze.

It stood out like a bell.

We've got to keep our ear to the wheel on this one.

The new product crept sideways into the marketplace.

Let's not jump before the cart here.

She'll give you some background and histrionics on the subject.

Two-family houses are hotter than sliced bread.

We're head over heels over the competition.

On the pages that follow you will find a variety of techniques for writing effectively.

THE EFFECTIVE WRITER

Strives for

Accuracy

Balance

Brevity

Cogency

Confidence

Conviction

Courtesy

Shuns

Abstraction

Ambiguity

Anger

Apology

Clichés

Confusion

Digression

Strives for

Directness
Forcefulness
Humaneness
Incisiveness
Interest
Logic
Lucidity
Moderation
Order
Persuasiveness
Precision
Rapport
Relevance
Simplicity
Sincerity
Specificity
Thoroughness

Shuns

Disclaimers
Dishonesty
Error
Evasion
Exaggeration
Gruffness
Hypocrisy
Indecision
Jargon
Obsequiousness
Pretension
Redundancy
Sexism
Stiffness
Timidity
Vagueness
Verbosity

Communicating Without Static

If business people (in our business, account executives) could only learn to write as they speak in an honest, open conversation, all our communications would be the better for it.

Richard J. Lord

President

Lord, Geller, Federico, Einstein

If it is just one page, I promise to read it with attention. If it is longer, my secretary will put it straight into a wastepaper basket.

Attributed to Winston Churchill

Letters, memos, and reports should communicate to the reader in a direct and accessible way. Too often, correspondence and reports are created more for the writer than for the reader—and when this happens, the written message becomes counterproductive and self-defeating.

This chapter covers ten aspects of skillfully written letters, memos, and reports.

The Ten C's

Effective writing is not a mysterious, hit-or-miss affair. In business, good writing is—

1. Clear
2. Candid
3. Concise
4. Correct
5. Coherent
6. Complete
7. Concrete
8. Convincing
9. Constructive
10. Conversational

1. Be clear

Lucid paragraphs composed of explicit sentences should make your reason for writing obvious to your reader.

Don't leave any doubt in your reader's mind about

your exact meaning. Sentences like these, if read literally, may be both unintentionally amusing and confusing:

No: The new director of public relations worked her way up from the reception desk to her present high office.

Yes: The new director of public relations started her career as a receptionist.

No: There isn't any question about the proposed advertising campaign's success in the opinion of the account executive.

Yes: The account executive believes that the proposed advertising campaign will succeed.

No: Before we can send up our satellite, it must be fully covered with insurance.

Yes: Before we can send up our satellite, we must insure it fully.

Readers appreciate a straightforward approach. Say simply what you have to say, and then stop. Avoid jargon, buzz words, and paralegal or bureaucratic phrases.

Jargon

To adjudicate

Caveat

De facto

Economically disadvantaged

To enjoin

Feedback

To dollarize

At this point in time

Impacted

Matrix

Translation

To judge

Warning

Really

Poor

To order

Response

To compute the cost

Now

Affected

Context, variety

<i>Jargon</i>	<i>Translation</i>
Parameters	Limits
Prima facie	Apparently true
To procure	To get
Qua	As
To quantify	To reduce to numbers
Quasi	Almost
Riffed	Fired
Subsector	Portion

While writers hope that jargon sounds impressively technical and shrewd, many readers react to it with distaste. Obscure, pretentious, trendy language is the foe of intelligibility—a smoke screen designed to disguise murky thinking and personal insecurity.

No: Here's a decent option, because it impacts excellently on our viable interface with labor, and that's the bottom line.

Yes: This is a good choice because it supports our sound relations with labor, and that's essential.

Where you need a technical word—like *matrix* or *prima facie*—and your reader is not likely to understand it, define the term the first time you use it. Also define acronyms and abbreviations when you first use them.

Watch out for homonyms. They are words with the same spellings or pronunciations but with different meanings. Used near each other, they may slow down a reader.

No: Before he *tabled* the motion, he referred to the *table* on page six of the report that had been placed on the *table* in front of him.

Yes: Before he *tabled* the motion, he referred to the *chart* on page six of the report that had been placed in front of him.

Certain kinds of words give our language structure. They tend to remain unchanged over time and are the scaffolding upon which are hung the words whose meanings shift and evolve. As long as the structure words fall into place, a sentence will sound more or less reasonable, even if it is nonsense.

Structure words are italicized in these two examples, one sensible, one not.

The four division heads are meeting in the library because it is the quietest room.

The four minduson fobs are dilling in the brantoly because it is the kenlex hoad.

Choose with special attention to meaning the words that fall between the structure words. Avoid weakening a sentence by burdening it with more structure words than it needs.

2. Be candid

Tell your readers the truth and nothing but the truth. They know when you're trying to disguise bad news or inflate good news. Exaggeration creates doubt; so do euphemisms.

Anyone who is recognized as having deceived, misled, or lied to colleagues is suspect forever.

Don't fudge on unfavorable information. Say you don't know if you don't know. Where doubt prevails, acknowledge doubt.

3. Be concise

Mark Twain is supposed to have said that he didn't write *metropolis* because he was paid the same amount for writing *city*. Today he might be paid more for writing *city*, if he were writing in business, where brevity is appreciated.

Don't let sentences and paragraphs run on—and on—and don't use a long word where a short one will do as well.

Don't repeat what your reader has written to you. Instead, start right in and answer the memo or letter. If you must refer to it, do so succinctly.

No: This is in reference to your memo of November first regarding use of the company dining room for personal entertaining.

Yes: Your question about use of the company dining room touches upon a current policy dispute.

By saying only what needs to be said and using only the words needed to say it, you will steer clear of—

- Digressions
- Redundancies
- Irrelevant details
- Stating the obvious

Prune your prose. Excesses of language that are common in business communications include—

Overdone

Advance planning

Advance warning

Ask the question

A small number of

At a later date

At a time when

Basic fundamentals

Brief in duration

Due to the fact that

Endorse on the back

General public

In view of the fact that

Merged together

Improved

Planning

Warning

Ask

A few

Later

When

Basics

Brief

Because

Endorse

Public

Because

Merged

Overdone

Mutual cooperation
 Not in a position to
 Regular monthly meetings
 Remains still
 Repeat again
 The color brown
 The reason is because
 Time of day
 Without further delay

Improved

Cooperation
 Can't
 Monthly meetings
 Remains
 Repeat
 Brown
 Because
 Time
 Immediately

Unrestrained use of adjectives and adverbs dilutes your writing. Choose them carefully.

Diluted

She is a *very good* technician, who works *efficiently* and *imaginatively*.

Direct

She is an *efficient* technician, who works *imaginatively*.

4. Be correct

Have all your facts, figures, and dates right. Be fussy about spelling, grammar, and punctuation. Address the appropriate people, accurately spelling their names and using their titles. The very people whom you most want to impress are often the ones who will zero in on errors.

Be precise in your use of words. Some typical errors made in business are corrected here:

Don't write

Adjure
 Administrate
 Affect
 Alternate
 Bona fides

When you mean

Abjure
 Administer
 Effect
 Alternative
 [*Bona fide has no plural*]