

WHAT DO YOU MEAN I CAN'T WRITE? Unlock success through effective management of your own and your staff's writing. This comprehensive desk reference shows you how to... get "letter perfect" results every time with the handy letter writing performance checklist... master 19 critical elements of punctuation and grammar... compose high-impact letters that inspire, persuade, close sales and get results... diplomatically convey sensitive information... use 4 different strategies to write persuasive, informative, positive or negative letters... tailor *all* forms of written communication to elicit the reader response you want and know when not to write. Appendices include 17 essential principles and 6 key elements for successful business writing plus a common sense guide to punctuation. With this easy-to-use desk reference you and your staff can write letters and memos that get the job done—effectively and efficiently every single time.

JOHN S. FIELDEN

RONALD E. DULEK

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Ronald E. Dulek

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DEDICATION

To Jean and Sally

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WRITE WELL TO DO WELL

Why can't most people write as easily and effectively as they'd like? Because no one has taught them *how to!* Time after time in classes we conduct for large corporations and government agencies, we find participants sitting, biting their pencils in agony, trying to determine how to begin a letter assignment.

We pick one class member and ask him or her, "What are you trying to accomplish?" "Well," the answer goes, "right now I am trying to figure out what my first few words ought to be."

"That's not what we asked," we continue. "What are you trying to accomplish?"

"Well, you see, I want Mr. Jones to give me a chance to present my sales proposal."

"Oh! Suppose Mr. Jones were standing right here? What would you say to him then?"

"I'd say, 'I really would appreciate it if you would give me an opportunity to tell you how the product I represent would really help your organization.'"

"That sounds like a very good beginning," we respond. "Why don't you say just that?"

In our programs we feel as if we are frequently freeing people from a bondage of insecurity bred by their educational experiences. We find business people all tied up by concerns about whether they should or shouldn't split infinitives, or end sentences with prepositions, or repeat the same word more than twice in the same letter, even though each of these bugaboos has been denounced as nonsense by most knowledgeable experts.

In this book we unabashedly pose as experts. We make this statement because that is what *you want* us to be. Practical business people don't want to know various opinions as to whether one may use a perfectly harmless and idiomatic word as "hopefully." All business people want is to have someone knowledgeable sort out what is important for them to know—and then to tell them.

We take this approach to grammar, as you will see, in the following pages. We know you have been exposed to 300-page grammar books all your life. And we suspect, if you're typical of most business people, that you still feel pretty shaky about grammar. So we have thrown out all the grammatical quibbles and have reduced grammar to a very few simple rules which, when mastered by you, will enable you to avoid about 90 percent of the grammatical errors that a business person could make.

The focus of this book is primarily on how *you personally* can write better. It also offers advice from time to time on how you can do a much better job of managing, demanding, and obtaining good writing from others, if such is, or will be, your job.

The single greatest benefit you will get from the experience of reading "What Do You Mean I Can't Write?" will be the mastery of a critical vocabulary so necessary to being able to discuss business writing. Most people simply do not have the words with which to describe to another person what is good or bad about a given piece of business writing.

In our training classes, we display on a screen a series of good and bad business letters. We ask the class members whether they like each letter. They generally like the good letters and don't like the bad ones. But when we ask them to tell us *why* they like a letter or why they don't, they are tongue-tied. Why? They have no common critical vocabulary.

What you will definitely get from *What Do You Mean I Can't Write?* is a vocabulary which will enable you to articulate what is

good and bad about a piece of writing. And in the process you will develop standards of excellence which from that point forward you will try to adhere to in every piece of on-the-job writing you do.

John S. Fielden
Ronald E. Dulek

We have made every effort to avoid sexist language in this text. In situations where a designation is necessary, such as in various scenarios, we have alternated male and female names.

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1

THE KEY TO SUCCESS: EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF YOUR OWN AND OTHERS' WRITING

In many (if not most) offices, writing involves more than one person. One prepares the draft of a memo or report, and the other (especially if the communication is important) inspects and approves it. Teamwork between writers and their bosses can be effective only if both parties share a common critical vocabulary.

Unfortunately, that is seldom the case. At this very moment, somewhere in your company, some boss (call him Mr. Brown) is reading with dismay a draft of a letter written for his signature. He calls his assistant in and says, "Green, this is terrible. Take this letter back and do it over." Poor Green retires to revise the epistle. After he returns with the revision, Brown reads it with tightened lips: "This is worse than the first one! Do it over again!" Green, knees trembling, dashes off to give it one more try and ultimately returns with the final version. Mr. Brown reads it, slams it down, and states emphatically, "You simply can't write, Green! I'll have to do this myself!"

So he goes into his office, closes the door, pulls the drapes, dims the light, hunches over Green's draft, and revises it. The

manager sends the edited version to word processing, and off it goes to the addressee. Poor Green, however, never sees it again. Moreover, Green has never learned what Brown didn't like about the letter.

In American industry this travesty passes for *management development*. And this in *the* most important area affecting Green's future!

It's incredible but true. But only in the area of written communication. If the boss took Green off to make an oral sales presentation to a customer, and Green butchered the presentation, the boss would be able to tell Green, point by point, what was done wrong. But this is not true in the area of writing.

What would happen if Green had asked the boss, "Just what am I doing wrong?" Most likely, Brown would have replied, "I'm not an English teacher! You went to school, didn't you? Just do it right!"

Why would he give such a brush-off answer? The truth of the matter is that most of the time the boss hasn't the foggiest notion of what Green has done wrong. All the boss knows is that he doesn't like it.

Some years ago, an article entitled "What Do You Mean I Can't Write?" appeared in *The Harvard Business Review* (May–June 1964).^{*} This article, in terms of reprints, became a runaway best seller and ended up being labeled by the editors as an "all-time *Harvard Business Review* classic." One reason for this article's success was the fact that it contained a checklist itemizing the various mistakes a writer could make in a piece of business writing.

After the *Harvard Business Review* article and its checklist came out, we imagine the following scene took place in many of the nation's corporations. Green comes to the boss and says, "What don't you like about my writing?" Brown looks at his watch and says, "I'm busy now, Green. See you in half an hour." Brown then rushes to his office and locks himself in. But, instead of secretly revising the drafts before him, he now gets out the checklist and some copies of Green's correspondence. He proceeds to dope out just what it is about Green's writing that he doesn't like.

^{*}Portions of this book reflect ideas developed in John S. Fielden's *Harvard Business Review* article "What Do You Mean I Can't Write?" (May–June 1964). Copyright © 1964 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College, all rights reserved.