

**Guidelines for Effective Business Writing:
Concise, Persuasive, Correct in Tone and “Inviting to Read”**

Most people don’t write well. Yet whether you are a corporate lifer or an entrepreneur, effective business writing is the single skill most likely to help you succeed.

One reason people don’t write well is because they don’t allocate enough time to the act of writing. Writing done well takes time. There are no effective shortcuts to proofreading and editing.

But an even more important reason people don’t write well is that they fail to follow simple guidelines that would make their writing concise, persuasive, correct in tone and “inviting to read.”

I may not be able to get you to take more time when you write something – the advent of e-mail (and the possibility of *immediate* feedback) has caused a substantial decline in the quality of business writing.

But even with your e-mails, I can make sure that you’re using four simple rules to improve your writing. *Following these four rules will do more to help your career and improve your family’s financial status than any other self-training initiative you’ve ever pursued.*

The sections of this paper are:

Guidelines for Effective Business Writing: Four Simple Rules

Good Writing is Concise	The best writing focuses on key points and eliminates unnecessary words and paragraphs. The key to making writing concise is proofreading and editing.
Good Writing is Persuasive	Effective business writing compels the reader to follow your recommendations through the cumulative weight of your clearly expressed arguments.
Good Writing is Correct in Tone	The best writing uses the language and jargon of your target reader in a way that seems natural, not forced. Jargon from your business is explained or eliminated.
Good Writing is “Inviting to Read”	Persuasive documents are easy for the reader to scan and understand. This means no long paragraphs, and frequent “visual breaks” like pictures or this table.

Good Writing Is Concise

Good writing is short and to the point – concise.

Concise doesn't mean "cryptic," where the truth is hidden because you provide too few details. If there's a complicated story to tell, you have to give all the pertinent facts. You just need to give these facts in the most economical package possible.

Concise also doesn't mean "neutral" – you can and should have a passionate point of view in many of the documents you write. You just need to "sell your story" in a precise way.

Concise writing almost always exhibits the following four features:

The Four Features of Concise Writing

Clear Structure	Virtually <i>all</i> documents should use the same basic structure: 1) an introduction that explains what you're writing about; 2) a clear summary of your recommendations (or a summary of the key points you're trying to communicate); 3) your supporting points in priority order; and 4) your recommended next steps.
Clear Topic Sentences	Each of your paragraphs should start with a topic sentence (i.e. a sentence that communicates the key message of the paragraph). The most memorable paragraphs are one sentence long – so don't be afraid of one sentence paragraphs that consist solely of your topic sentence.
Short Paragraphs	No one ever reads a paragraph over nine lines long. Research proves that readers skip over them. <i>So never write a paragraph longer than nine lines. EVER!</i>
Cumulative Reasoning and Flow	Well written documents have a smooth logic flow from beginning to end: "Here's what I'm writing about – here are my key points – here's why my recommendations are correct – here's what you should do next." A document that flows like this will usually succeed in its purpose.

If you get nothing else from this e-document, use the information in this table on every document you write. **Always** structure your documents as indicated above. **Always** use topic sentences – re-read your paper, and make sure the first sentence in each paragraph describes the main point of that paragraph.

Keep your paragraphs short – just like I've done here.

And use the structure of your document as the skeleton of your logic flow: intro, recco, supporting points, next steps.

Good Writing is Persuasive

If you ever watch the movie *Broadcast News* – and it’s a classic – the successful broadcaster advises his more intelligent but less successful friend: “You’re not just reading the news. You’re trying to *sell* one piece of information in each story. And you’re trying to sell yourself.”

This is exactly right – effective writing, just like effective speaking, should always have at its core the act of persuasion. You should always be “selling” something when you write – even if it’s simply the fact that your good writing is “selling” what a competent individual you are.

The good news is that making a document persuasive is easy to do, every time – *if you simply use the same basic document structure (intro, recco, supporting points, next steps) every time, your document will “automatically” develop a persuasive logic flow.*

Being persuasive doesn’t require fancy adjectives or strings of superlatives.

Instead, you simply need to sit down before writing and answer two basic questions:

Q1) Why am I writing this document?

and then

Q2) What are the main recommendations or points I want people to remember?

Literally jot down the answers to these questions on a scrap of paper.

Then jot down your supporting points on the same piece of paper.

Now you’re ready to write effectively.

Good Writing is Correct in Tone

Effective business writing takes the perspective of the reader. This means:

- 1) never use jargon from your industry or your organizational level unless you are *absolutely certain* that your reader will understand these terms;
- 2) alternatively, you should try to use the jargon the reader would use, as long as you're *absolutely certain* you're using these words / phrases correctly; and
- 3) make sure the tenor of your document is the right pitch. So, for example, documents written for top management should be more formal, while documents written to motivate a sales force can be more emotional and forceful.

Take this brief quiz to determine whether or not you understand what correct tone means in a variety of different documents:

Quick Quiz: Test Your Understanding of “Correct Tone”

When writing a memo for the CFO of your organization, describing why your recommended expense account expenditures are appropriate, circle the jargon below that is appropriate to use in your memo:

- a) payback, return on investment, competitive expenditure levels
- b) prudent expenditures appropriate for the level of targeted sales
- c) table dancing, good buzz on, informal payments

When writing a memo for your customer about the equipment you're selling, appropriate jargon includes:

- a) payback, return on investment, competitive expenditure levels
- b) integrated automation package decreasing cycle time
- c) doo-hickey, software thingy, informal payments

When writing a memo to your boss indicating why your performance rating should be higher:

- a) expanding skill set, effective self-development, documented goal attainment
- b) focused dedication and competitive excellence
- c) table dancing, good buzz on, informal payments

If you've circled any c's, think hard about your current career choice.

(See, I knew that the correct tone for a boring e-document like this would include a bit of humor. Well, perhaps a very small bit. But trust me on this – don't try this type of faint humor in a “real” business document.)

Good Writing is “Inviting to Read”

Effective business writing goes beyond the text you create – effective business documents are also structured to maximize understanding and retention.

First and foremost, this means that your paragraphs are short. No one will *ever* read a paragraph over nine lines long. But people often use their longest, most complicated paragraph to synthesize key arguments and make their key points.

So liberate your key points – just like I’m doing here – by making them the topic sentence of their own paragraph.

You’ll soon see that one sentence paragraphs are the most memorable paragraphs you write.

Second, your document should feature “visual breaks” within the text. A visual break is any non-text element – a table, a graph, a picture. These breaks give the reader an “oasis” every once in a while throughout your document.

These visual breaks are important for another reason – as they used to say at Procter & Gamble, different readers process information in different ways. There are “text people” who get their information from words. (I’m one of those.) And then there are “table people” who get their information from numbers and graphs. (Engineers usually fit into this category.)

Therefore, providing readers with graphs, tables and pictures that illustrate your points helps your document communicate to the full universe of readers.

Should every document have these “visual breaks?” No. Certainly they’re not necessary with one page e-mails. But have you noticed that every one of my e-documents has these visual break sprinkled liberally throughout the text? That’s not a coincidence – I try to practice what I preach.

Finally, your document should try to use page breaks as a strong editing tool. You should always try to end each section of your document at the end of a page. This way, turning the page physically also represents turning the page in terms of the logic and intent of your document.

(Go back and check my e-documents – you’ll see once again that I try to practice what I preach in regards to page breaks.)

Proofread and Edit

But even with all of these rules and clever writing tricks, the most important acts in writing are proofreading and editing.

No one gets a document right the first time. The single most important act in writing is to stop – s l o w d o w n for a second – and then proofread what you've just written. (The best proofreading trick is to read your document aloud. That helps you catch errors you might otherwise miss.)

Proofreading is important even on one page e-mails, *if you believe that anyone in management may see your one page e-mail.*

Because I guarantee you – good writing is noticed. And bad writing is “noticed” too, even if the document you wrote was intended to be informal.

When you proofread a document, you should be checking for spelling and grammatical errors. Microsoft helps you in both areas – red squiggles under your text for spelling errors, green squiggles for grammatical problems.

There are no excuses for spelling errors. If you're not stopping to scan your documents with spellchecker before printing / sending them, you're a dolt. (I have a bit more sympathy for typos like “there” versus “their” and “thing snot” versus “things not.” The computer can't catch everything.)

In terms of grammar, I urge you not to give in to Microsoft's tyranny. You'll notice that there are green squiggles in this document. Microsoft is not big brother – and there may be times when the way you write may not be grammatically correct, but it may be effective. Use your judgment here.

But the most important part of proofreading is editing your document – and the most important part of editing your document is cutting down what you're written.

Occasionally when you edit your document, you'll add a missing paragraph or a missing sentence that ties everything together in a particularly smashing ways. Adding this sentence, and then perhaps re-arranging some paragraphs, makes your entire document more compelling and complete.

But far more often editing entails cutting, cutting, and then cutting some more. Cutting down paragraphs, liberating topic sentences, and then eliminating words, sentences and entire sections.

That's where the trick of trying to use page breaks as section breaks in your documents is a useful tool. Whenever a section of your document spills over to the top of the next page, take this as a personal challenge to shorten the section just enough to hold yourself to one page.

In fact, you can check me on this – through careful editing I've aligned page breaks with section breaks in every section of this e-document except this one. And that's helped me write a more concise and inviting to read document.

That's it – nothing painful. Just a few simple guidelines you can and should use to make your business writing more effective.

Now get ready for case study examples that will help you hone your writing and enhance your career.

This is another in an on-going series of e-documents from Dave Lefkowitz (“Lefty”) of The Canyon Group Inc.

These e-documents are intended to help real people succeed in the real world.

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