



# *“My Golden Writing Tip”*

*101 businesspeople reveal  
what helps them most*

# Wisdom

## ...of the crowd

*Through years of trial and error* we've all discovered insights into writing quickly and effectively. To accelerate your journey, wouldn't it be great to pick the brains of many other businesspeople for their wisdom?

We did just that, asking hundreds of Australian businesspeople this question:

*“What writing tip, technique or strategy has saved you the most time, made you the most money, or given you the best results at work?”*

Now we're excited to present the top 101 ideas. Some are inspired (they're a must-read) while others are sound common sense. But they'll all improve that crucial business skill – your writing. (And quite a few sound familiar to me – good to know people are using what we taught them!)

### *A ready reference*

You'll learn lots reading this cover to cover, but it's especially handy as a quick-reference tool. The tips are organised to help you at various stages of your writing process.

### *How we edited the tips*

To make them as useful as possible, we edited them for brevity and readability, being careful to keep each writer's original meaning.

Some tips applied to more than one writing category, so to avoid duplication, we chose the most useful application of them. [Often I added extra insights from my own professional writing experience, in square brackets like this.]

### *Share the love*

Think this is valuable? Let others know. But please don't forward it to them. We invested lots of time and money pulling this together, so kindly respect our work by sending them to [www.magneto.net.au](http://www.magneto.net.au). There they can quickly download it themselves, along with an offer to subscribe to our monthly writing tips – all free, of course.

Enjoy!



Paul Jones

Director

Magneto Communications

P.S. Learn more: earn more! For our career-changing writing training and short seminars, [let's talk](#).

# Writing:

*A tough nut to quack?*



*In exchange* for these ideas, we committed to donating 100 ducks (\$2000) to third-world families through *Oxfam*.

For our investment, “our” ducks will help hundreds of people. That’s a deal you can’t beak!

## *Why ducks?*

*Ducks are an environmentally sustainable boon to third-world families – they provide eggs, control pests, and help cultivate fields for planting.*

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# Dig

*...up what you need*



# Dig

## Getting started

1. *Just start writing. You can't edit nothing!*
2. Stop procrastinating; just get some black on white. [Paul: See "Procrastinator Terminator"]
3. Procrastinating? List all your ideas as bullets. Then organise them from most important to least. You now have a rough outline – and you've started! [Paul: Clarifying your objective can help. What are you trying to achieve with your message? Write that down.]
4. Before writing a report or letter, jot down a short list of key points you want to make. Stick to these as a structural base so your writing is to the point but covers everything needed. This saves time and helps avoid ambiguity.
5. No one's first draft ever became a best seller. This takes all the pressure off trying to be perfect, and makes it easier to start. Just put pen to paper and start writing – after all, it's "just a draft." Brilliance can come in the editing. [Paul: E.M. Forster said, "How do I know what I think until I see what I write?"]
6. "First say it straight, then say it great." Instead of getting caught up trying to say something cleverly, just start writing. [Paul: This is a quote from an outstanding copywriter, Luke Sullivan.]

7. Get past your inner critic that undermines your confidence and breaks your concentration. Natalie Goldberg, author of several books on writing, suggests "free-writing" for a pre-determined time – say, five minutes for starters. Just write whatever comes into your head, but edit nothing. It's a great way to warm up. Although most of what you write this way will be disposable, you'll surprise yourself with some real gems.
8. Just get it all down on paper in a big "dump," ignoring spelling, grammar, structure, etc. [Paul: You don't always have to start at the beginning; start wherever is easiest.]
9. Remove all distractions when trying to write important documents. Especially turn off all your phones and email alert. [Paul: ...and Facebook, Twitter, etc. See "Distractions make you dumb" .]

## Connecting with readers

10. "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change." I always look at things from my audience's perspective. I inform them on a "need to know" basis, which they appreciate because it saves them time. [Paul: Stand in their shoes! See "Know thy readers" .]

# Dig

## Connecting with readers

- 11.** *Assume people are NOT interested and have NO time to read your communication. Get readers interested by phrasing information in terms of “what’s in it” for them.*
- 12.** *Write as if your readers are lazy, busy and selfish. It gets you really focused on your reader and their short attention span.*
- 13.** *Remember your readers’ emotions. How do they feel about your topic? Get in synch with that, then move them to another place with your own enthusiasm, excitement or whatever your objective is. Robert Frost said, “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader.”*
- 14.** *Try to make life easy for your reader. Be sensitive to what matters most to them. Good writing happens when your emotional intelligence is ON.*
- 15.** *Write with the assumption that readers have the right intention, instead of assuming they need to be told what to do. It adds a friendlier tone to the note and orients it to their perspective.*
- 16.** *Pitch the story to someone who has little knowledge of the subject to see how you end up simplifying the story to highlight the main points. Looks of confusion will tell you if you’re getting off track. It’s a good way to see your story from another point of view. For most writing, your target audience is the general public, so anyone must be able to easily understand your story.*
- 17.** *Make sure you know who will read your work, and use style, content and structure specifically for that audience. Never assume your reader thinks the way you do. Ask yourself, “Would my reader understand and appreciate this?”*
- 18.** *Always think of your reader and what you ask him/her to read. [Paul: What would make you want to read it or do what you’re asking?]*
- 19.** *I write with the individual in mind, so I have a general idea of what I need to say. But then I tailor it according to what feels right to say to that person. I guess it’s using my intellect to direct, and then add the feelings, which can be different for each person and each circumstance.*
- 20.** *It has to be focused on “you” [the reader] not “me” [the writer] – especially in sales. [Paul: See “It’s all about YOU” .]*

# Dig

## Fresh ideas

**21.** Stress kills creativity. If you want to come up with interesting approaches or ideas, relax. Try to get into a good mood: Change your writing environment, eat something nice, or put on great music. Talking to others about the task also helps. [Paul: [How to get in "flow".](#)]

**22.** Gather all your research first. Forums are a valuable source of information and opinion on any subject. They give you all sides of a story before you write about it. [Paul: Also try asking questions on [LinkedIn](#) or [Twitter](#).]

**23.** Don't write with a keyboard – use paper. When you write in a word processor you tend to edit yourself as you write. This slows down the creative process and restricts the real value – the concept or idea being captured. I always “sketch” words on paper then clean up when I'm happy the message or concept is clear.

**24.** When you're generating new ideas, turn off your inner editor. Go crazy. Let yourself come up with wild ideas, even dumb ones. Set a goal for a certain number of ideas, not quality. You have to kiss a lot of frogs to get a prince.

**25.** Mind mapping can help you work out what to say that hasn't been said before. [Paul: [More on mind mapping](#). See also [www.bubbl.us](http://www.bubbl.us) for free online mindmapping]

**26.** Shift F7, thesaurus, has saved my life. It's a quick way of brainstorming fresh ideas. [Paul: Or <http://thesaurus.reference.com/>.]

**27.** I use the lines of a poem by Rudyard Kipling to ensure I cover everything I should: “I keep six honest serving-men (they taught me all I knew); their names are What and Why and When and How and Where and Who.” [Paul: These are the “5 Ws and H” that journalists use to flesh stories out.]

**28.** Write from the heart. [Paul: Be sincere and authentic. And if you're trying to influence, persuade or sell, ensure you're “sold” on whatever you're proposing.]

**29.** Play the devil's advocate. [Paul: Completely switching sides can reveal any weaknesses in your argument or position.]

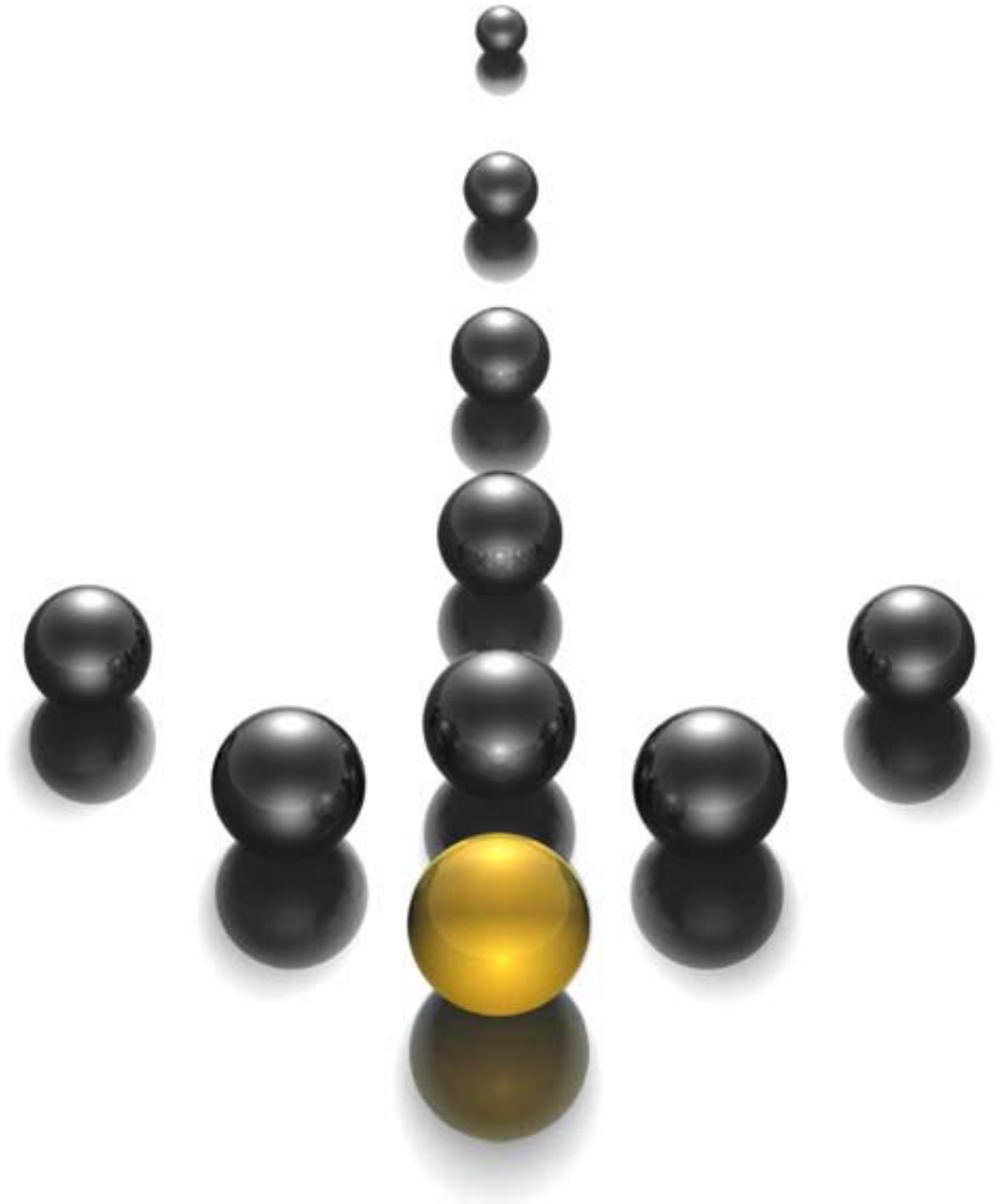
**30.** Lateral-thinking expert Edward de Bono has a book called “Six Thinking Hats.” Each “hat” is really just a conscious adoption of a different thinking style. I've found it very useful for brainstorming and solving problems. [Paul: [More here](#).]

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# Organise

*...for easy reading*



# Organise

## Engaging structure

**31.** *Make your point up front. [Paul: Many news stories are written in “inverted pyramid” structure, which is simply “big news first.” It’s an excellent policy for business writing. See “One rule to rule them all”.]*

**32.** *“Lead with the need. Don’t get to the point – start with it.” Web copy expert, Gerry McGovern, says this. Research shows that most people only read the first couple of words in website headings and links, and only keep reading if those words engage them. It applies to other mediums, too. E.g. in an email subject header, instead of, “EOFY finance report – pls draft intro”, try: “Pls draft intro for EOFY finance report”.*

**33.** *First define your key message. Write it down in plain English. Then decide its structure. [Paul: You could decide structure by listing short bullets, then prioritising them.]*

**34.** *From a Magneto course, I learned that one of the biggest keys to using structure to keep readers engaged is to anticipate their reactions. If you say “X,” what will their reaction be? Intrigue, apathy, confusion, anger? Respond quickly to that or they’ll lose interest.*

**35.** *Don’t “waffle on.” To get your audience’s attention, get to the point.*

**36.** *List the benefits up front.*

**37.** *Look at your last sentence. It may have more impact if you make it your introduction.*

**38.** *First think about the three-to-five key points you want your audience to walk away with. This focuses your writing.*

**39.** *“SNOW” is cool:*  
*S – Stop and think before touching your keyboard or mouse;*  
*N – Note key points, headings, phrases;*  
*O – Organise notes – refer to Magneto handbook;*  
*W – Write in a more thoughtful, reader-friendly way, not just reacting to the email on the screen!*

**40.** *I use a simple formula when writing: IPB.*  
*I – Incident. I describe an Incident; what happened; how I felt about it.*  
*P – Point. What made the Point worth mentioning; what’s the essence; what’s interesting?*  
*B – Benefit. What’s the lesson; what have I learned, or what can others learn from it?*

# Organise

## Engaging structure

**41.** Always have the following three structures to your communication:

- (i) Past – Why am I writing this?
- (ii) Present – What’s the current situation?
- (iii) Future – To resolve or complete the matter, what are you going to do OR what would you like done?

**42.** This is my favourite problem-solving structure:

- (i) Where now? (Where are we now?)
- (ii) Where then? (Where do we want to be?)
- (iii) What now? (What do we need to do to get there?)

**43.** When communicating in writing with my team, I give the context and purpose, and then the answers to the “who, what, when, and how” questions.

**44.** Templates, templates, templates.  
[Paul: Don’t re-invent the wheel if you don’t have to. Have you or a colleague written something similar before? Is there a template you could use?]

**45.** Avoid the word processor until you’re clear on what you’re going to write. Map out your thoughts on a page of unlined paper (from Post-it Note to flipchart). It’s only worth writing when you have the structure right.

**46.** Pay attention to transitions – they’re the “glue” that holds your structure together.  
[Paul: [More here](#)]

## Attention-getting headings

**47.** Take time to understand the power of headlines, particularly in email subject headers. I find [Copyblogger](#) a very useful resource.

**48.** I always start with headings. I type all relevant information under them, ignoring spelling or grammar; I just get my thoughts down. I then review, cull and finalise. Headings help keep me on track. If they seem too formal in the final product, I just delete them.

**49.** Stand back and look at your page; if your email or executive summary is complex, add sub-headings. [Paul: See “[A GPS for your reader](#)”.]

**50.** To help readers of your emails, try to summarise your whole message in your subject header. If, after various replies and forwards, the message changes, change the subject header to reflect the new topic.

**51.** Put “news” in your headlines to help skim-readers. E.g. in a report, don’t just say, “Recommendation”; say “Recommendation: Upgrade server” (or whatever your recommendation is).



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# Write

*...like a pro*



# Write

## Strategy

**52.** *KISS (Keep it Simple, Stupid), especially when you're explaining something complex.*

**53.** *Start the proposal or letter by getting your reader nodding. They should be thinking, "This person gets it." Show how you "get" their need – i.e., you acutely feel it, understand, or empathise with them. You could be direct: "From our conversation, we understand that your business needs ..." Or you could express their need by describing what they're facing: "As the effects of the Global Financial Crisis move from the financial sector into manufacturing and retail, you'll face specific challenges, namely ..." Either way, try to positively engage your reader with a sense that they've been heard, understood and appreciated. [Paul: For more persuasive psychology, see "The 'Influence' series" (e-zines 5–10) [here](#).]*

**54.** *You only get what you ask for. [Paul: In persuasive writing, ask for what you want, make it crystal clear what the next step is, and make it easy for them to do it.]*

**55.** *Start by pointing out or explaining the problem/challenge/obstacle facing the reader and offer an attractive solution for it. Sometimes you need to predict a future problem for the client, e.g. "Failing to secure a trademark for your business name could lead to ...(name a pain)."* [Paul: See [my Bnet video interview on persuasive writing](#).]

**56.** *Use writers to write and experts to give information to the writers, because 99% of experts can't write.*

## Keeping it short

**57.** *Less is more. Remember that your writing is more and more likely to be read on a mobile device with a tiny screen. Reading long-winded essays in a bouncing bus or train leads to something you don't want your brand associated with – motion sickness.*

**58.** *Shorten sentences, delete useless phrases, and make your language more action-oriented.*

**59.** *If you can say it with fewer words, do so. [Paul: See "Keep it short, sport".]*

**60.** *Make it short, sharp and focused. Focus on your intended message then hit "delete" until you've said it as succinctly as possible.*

**61.** *When writing complex messages, use shorter sentences.*

# Write

## Keeping it short

- 62.** Use one idea per sentence.
- 63.** Cover one concept per paragraph. And keep the paragraphs short.
- 64.** Long sentences are a killer! Always make sentences short, sharp and succinct. [Paul: Ideal average sentence length = 15 words.]
- 65.** Remove redundancy! E.g., change “For the period of six months” to “For six months”. And change passive voice to active voice. [Paul: Active voice includes an “actor,” and places it/him/her before the “action.” E.g. “Zach (actor) suggested we read more (action),” is in the active voice. But “It is suggested that we read more,” and “It is suggested by Zach that we read more,” are both in passive voice.]

## Adapting your style

- 66.** Use plain English! You’re trying to communicate, not impress your university lecturer. [Paul: Never use a big word when a diminutive, exiguous or Lilliputian one will do.]
- 67.** Less is more. Strive for simplicity of expression. [Paul: Great point. Using verbs instead of nouns also helps. E.g. this would become, “Strive to express yourself simply.” See “Fat-Free Writing” .]
- 68.** Stick to the facts and deliver the message in the fewest words possible while still being entertaining and interesting. A good vocabulary helps you achieve this. [Paul: To build your vocabulary, get Dictionary.com’s *Word of the Day* sent to you.]
- 69.** Write as you talk – clearly and directly.
- 70.** Use natural language. Go easy on the technical jargon. [Paul: See “Is your writing ‘Old Style’ or ‘New Skool’?”.]
- 71.** A friendly, relaxed style of writing connects better with readers. Create more of a conversation than a monologue. [Paul: “You attract more bees with honey than vinegar.” Watch your tone, especially in emails. Tone reflects your attitude, so to write friendly, try to feel friendly. See “Tone Deaf” .]
- 72.** Write as though it’s a conversation. Writing can be very formal, technical and tedious. Writing as though you’re speaking to someone makes it flow naturally, both in the writing and the reading.
- 73.** Not writing “business speak” in emails has helped me get the most out of senior managers.

# Write

## Adapting your style

**74.** *The shorter the message, the more effective it is. [Paul: That's true for informational writing. For persuasive writing, you need more words to build your argument.]*

**75.** *On stage, you have to earn your silences and your screams. In writing, you have to earn your exclamation marks and full capitals. I find excessive exclamation marks and CRAZY CAPITALS cheap, amateur and ultimately meaningless!!!! Ask yourself, "Is this statement really worth exclaiming? Do I really want to SCREAM this word? Or is there a more imaginative way of getting my point across?"*

## Editing & proofreading

**76.** *Never just press "send" or "print" without re-reading it. A sloppy mistake will be remembered long after the extra minute to respond is forgotten. If it's important, try to sleep on it, then re-read and edit the next day with fresh eyes. If you don't have time for that, ask someone else to read it for clarity, brevity and impact. If you're too time-strapped even for that, take a deep breath, put on your reader's hat and look over it again. [Paul: See "Exterminating Errors".]*

**77.** *If possible, review your writing at a different time, or under different circumstances (e.g. while relaxing with a cup of coffee), before sending it. What sounds fine when your head is full of ideas is sometimes rubbish when read in the cool light of day.*

**78.** *Good writing takes time. Think, write, review and then write again. Always be willing to accept feedback. [Paul: Good writing is rewriting with fresh eyes.]*

**79.** *Get at least two others to proofread it. We can get too close to our work and can't see the wood for the trees, or the spelling mistakes for the grammatical ones ...*

**80.** *Proofread, proofread, proofread. I know it's an oldie, but it's a goodie. Your writing reflects your professionalism. Do what you can to save readers' time. [Paul: For more on looking professional, see "Writing in your Underpants".]*

# Write

## Editing & proofreading

**81.** When writing something important, always try to close the email, document, presentation, etc, and review it again after working on something unrelated. That way you'll proofread it more like the audience for whom it's intended.

**82.** Sleep on it. Write it, leave it for 24 hours and come back to it with a clear head to review it. That allows your subconscious to work on it.

**83.** Love what you just wrote? Think again – it may not be that great. Don't get too attached to your writing, or editing will hurt!

**84.** I use a number of different proofreading techniques, depending on the document's size:

- If it's a smaller document, proofread line by line.
- If time allows, leave it alone and check it another day. Or if it has to be completed that day, recheck it later in the day.
- Print it then proofread the hardcopy with a red pen.

**85.** When checking spelling of difficult words, I often read the words or sentences backwards. That way my eye falls on every letter.

**86.** When writing emails [or any document], turn on the automatic inline spellchecker. When emails come to me with obvious spelling errors that an auto-spellchecker would have picked up,

*I wonder if the sender doesn't care about appearing foolish. [Paul: To change your spellchecker to Australian spelling, highlight (select) your entire document, then double-click the little "English (U.S.)" box at the bottom of your MS Word screen. You'll then see an "English (Australia)" option.]*

**87.** Reading your document aloud (and slowly) before submitting it helps you pick up annoying errors that spellcheck misses (e.g. when the word is spelt correctly but it's the wrong word).

**88.** Don't rely solely on spellcheck; re-read your document or get another set of fresh eyes to give it a final review.

**89.** If you're unsure of grammar, read the sentence aloud. If it sounds wrong, it probably is! [Paul: [The O.W.L. \(Online Writing Lab\)](#) at Purdue University is an excellent grammar resource.]

**90.** "Its" or "it's"? If it is his/hers/its, then no apostrophe. Otherwise, can it be "it is"? If so, then it is "it's". [Paul: A good rule of thumb is to ONLY use "it's" when it means "it is" – never for possessive.]

# Write

## Layout/formatting

**91.** *The first thing people notice about your writing is how it looks. It's a lot easier to begin with a good impression than to try to recover from a poor one, so invest time laying out your document well.*

**92.** *First impressions count, so make a good one. It's not just what you say, it's how you present your writing that determines how effective your message is. A professional appearance gives your writing credibility. But spelling, grammar and punctuation errors, or poor layout, erode it.*

**93.** *Use bullet points (or equivalent) in emails to:*

- *make them easy to read;*
- *keep them short, sharp and to the point;*
- *keep your reader reading!*

**94.** *Use pictures. [Paul: "A picture is worth a thousand words." The most attention-getting pictures are colour, not black and white; large, not small; of unusual things, not common; in an unusual shape, not a standard one; and of people, not things.]*

**95.** *In a long email, bold or colour any action items so they catch your reader's eye – even if they don't read the rest. [Paul: Better still, put them towards the start of your email, if possible; i.e. lead with the "big news".]*

**96.** *In MS Word, use [Shift]+[Ctrl]+C for copying the format of a word or paragraph and then [Shift]+[Ctrl]+V to paste this format as often as you like to other areas of your text. [Paul: Or use Word's "Format Painter" button.]*

**97.** *Captions on pictures or graphics are the third most-read element on the page, so use them to help drive home your key messages.*

## Tricky messages

**98.** *If you need to address a negative subject, frame it objectively. Never start with, "I don't like how you did X." Rather, approach the negativity with the facts, e.g. "The problem is with how X has been done." [Paul: This is using the "passive voice," which omits the "actor" from the sentence, and just talks about the action. Passive voice can be more diplomatic.]*

# Write

## Tricky messages

**99.** *When writing a scathing attack on someone for an injustice upon yourself, take time to carefully construct it, leave it overnight, re-read it in the morning, then, most importantly, delete it.*

**100.** *Sometimes the best writing strategy is simply, "Don't write ... talk instead." Pick up the phone. In tackling a sensitive situation, you could waste an hour or more carefully crafting an email or letter to achieve just the right tone and message. By all means, make some notes and plan your message, but often the best way to communicate the right sentiment is to have a genuine conversation with the reader. If you need a record of the conversation, follow it up with a quick email.*

**101.** *Frustration or anger don't make for good writing. Take a break. The right words will flow when you are calmer and more focused. [Paul: But sometimes the best email is a phone call!]*



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