

WRITING WRONGS

✉ You wouldn't meet a client in scruffy clothes. Sub-standard writing reflects just as badly.

Making the effort to write well can boost your business.

By Paul Jones

How impressed would you be if a company representative met you in filthy shoes, shirt out and with breath from the grave? Unfocused writing riddled with errors turns people cold just as fast. Since writing reflects the writer, the subtext is that their thinking is muddled and they either don't know how to write well or don't care about detail—none of which are endearing business traits.

However, it is highly likely that some or all of your employees are sending sub-standard writing to your prospects or clients while you read this.

Many businesses tackle the risk head-on. According to a 2004 United States National Commission on Writing survey, American companies spend more than \$3 billion annually on training staff to write better. Forty per cent of US companies regularly invest in writing training for employees, and half of the responding companies considered candidates' writing skills when recruiting.

Writing skills should be a high priority, considering their potential to make or break relationships or deals and have an impact on your bottom line.

Here are some first steps to breathing life into your and your employees' writing.

On a mission

Strong writing starts with a clear purpose. Cutting to the chase gives your reader context and helps you, the writer, stay on track. Often your goal will be to inspire action from your reader such as approving a new project, buying

something or simply replying to your email. Step into your reader's shoes: If you were them, what would make you want to do what you're asking?

Tone deaf?

Ever been on either end of a misunderstood email? The culprit was tone, which is how you say something (try saying "Great work" to someone while rolling your eyes). Writing—deprived of gestures, facial expressions or voice—has to work much harder to avoid misunderstandings.

The best insurance is to put your first draft aside for a while—overnight if possible. Then read it again before sending it. You'll almost always see areas to clarify meaning.

Inside their heads

The ease with which you get someone's head nodding depends on your ability to get into it in the first place. If you know how they think, you can anticipate their reactions and push their buttons. So get to know them. Talk to them. Read what they read.

A popular copywriter's trick is to look at a picture of your typical reader and imagine you're writing just to them.

Keep it simple

Never use a long word when an exiguous one will do. Jokes aside, the simplest way to say something is often the best. Don't try to impress readers; just be clear.

WRITE BETTER EMAILS

The '5-30' email rule drastically reduces the time it takes people to read and respond to email. It borrows from the inverted pyramid principle (see main story).

To apply it, begin your emails with the 'five-second' overview of your message so your reader knows what to expect. Then give them the longer '30-second' version.

Introduce only one new idea per paragraph (short paragraphs are great), and where possible use bulleted lists instead of long sentences

Pyramid power

Take a tip from journalists: prioritise your ideas, placing the most important ones (to your reader) at the start of your piece, followed progressively by less important ones. This inverted pyramid style saves readers having to dig for your main message.

Go with the flow

Writing with logical 'flow' keeps readers engaged. Disjointed ideas and paragraphs are jarring, so plan your structure before you start.

Before you finish, check your transitions—the sentences that take readers smoothly from one idea to the next. You can easily forget to fix them after cutting and pasting chunks of text.

Seeing red

Contrary to appearances, a document covered in red corrections is a sign of life—at least you've found the errors before your reader. Time spent proofreading will minimise embarrassing mistakes (did you catch that one?). Sloppy spelling, grammar and punctuation make your writing harder to understand and weaken your credibility.

The golden rule: proofread important documents after you've had a break away from them—preferably overnight.

Training grounds

It said in this magazine recently: "Training and development opportunities are the number one factor attracting people to Australian com-

panies." ('Getting better all the time', *hrmonthly* May 2007) In the current talent crisis, a strong commitment to training and development is good policy. Given the business risks of poor writing, it makes sense to include quality writing training in your learning and development program.

From our experience, it's not enough to just teach writing skills well. To maximise long-term impact, trainers should also work hard at motivating people to want to write better. It should be stressed that it can boost your credibility, sales and reputation. ✕

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