

# BUSINESS WRITING: TURN YOUR PANIC INTO PROFIT

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**You're great at oral presentations, adept at one-on-one sales calls. You've even mastered the dreaded cold call. But when it comes to writing—putting your thoughts down on paper—you panic.**

**How should I start? How can I get all my ideas on one page? How will I write this so busy people will read it? How do I persuade them to buy my product?**

Writing sales letters, proposals, memos and e-mail becomes easier if you take your reader's point of view when you plan your document.

## **Think like your reader**

Before writing, jot down everything your reader might want to know:

- If you were meeting in person, what questions would she ask?
- If you're writing a marketing letter to potential clients, what questions will they have about your product and your company?
- If you're writing a memo to your boss requesting a raise, what will he need to know about your performance and responsibilities?

By putting a face on your readers, you can organize your thoughts and choose your words with their most important questions in mind. Writing becomes easier.

By answering your reader's questions, you've handled content — what to include. Now your task is to organize your ideas and present them clearly and concisely.

Easier said than done? Not really. Keep these basic principles of successful business writing in mind and you'll write documents that are targeted and persuasive.

## **What's your bottom line?**

Use the BLUF principle when organizing your documents: get the Bottom Line Up Front. Place your main message in the first paragraph of a sales report, the lead of a letter, the subject line of a memo or e-mail.

This is prime real estate. Don't squander it with a weak lead or long greeting. *"We can show you how to increase your profits by 20 percent"* is more powerful than *"We have a new service we'd like you to know about."*

The job of the opening sentence of your sales letter, memo, or proposal is to hook your readers. Many writers wait until the end — the last paragraph of their document — to give their big pitch. But without a reason to read on, your potential customers may never get to the end.

Use your lead to tell them that you can increase profits, then use the rest of the document to tell them how.

### **Express, don't impress!**

Your product is cutting edge, the technology complex. But your writing should be simple. Don't try to impress your reader with jargon.

Keep your sentences clear and direct. Your purpose isn't to overwhelm your readers with what you know, but rather to show what you can do for them.

### **Make your writing reader-friendly**

Your clients are busy people. Their desks are piled high with letters and reports, their e-mail boxes are crammed with messages.

Is your document easy on the eye? Have you used white space, bullets, and short paragraphs to chunk information and make your communication easy to read and navigate? If you are sending a long proposal, memo or report, have you used headings to break the text into meaningful segments?

Make sure your communication is enticing. Do your letterhead and logo present a professional and pleasing image? Can you use other visuals—photos, illustrations, sketches, charts—to carry part of your message or story?

### **How you say it is as important as what you say**

The tone of your writing — your attitude toward your subject and your readers — is as important as the content of your communication. Don't confuse bureaucratic with businesslike. Make your writing professional and personal by using pronouns such as I, we, you. Use the active voice to maintain a direct, personal tone (*I will call you to set up an appointment*), rather than the passive voice (*You will be contacted*).

### **Spell it write!**

Spelling and grammar errors give potential customers reason to question your competence. Does your inattention to spelling reflect your company's inattention to its customers?

A spell-checker is the first line of defense. But it won't flag correctly spelled words used incorrectly (right, write). Find a friend, colleague or employee who's a spelling and grammar champ, and ask him to read important documents. Or make a list of your own spelling demons and check the list before sending anything.

Most important, make sure you spell the name of your recipient correctly. Nothing's more insulting than a "personal" letter from someone who didn't bother to get your name right!

### Tips for writing sales letters

- **Use "you."** Addressing your reader personally sets the right tone for the letter
- **Make your letter visually pleasing and professional.** Break information into chunks and label the chunks with headings.
- **Close your letter by reemphasizing your main point.** Avoid over-used closings such as "If you have questions, feel free to call."
- **Make it easy for your readers to respond to the letter.** Be sure to include information about how to contact you, or when you'll contact them (and make sure you do!).
- **Consider adding a P.S.** The P.S. is the most-read part of a sales letter. Try a handwritten P.S. to personalize your letters in this computer-generated era.

### Tips for writing E-mail

- **Write an informative subject line.** Readers use the subject line to perform e-mail triage. The subject line should tell your reader what you're writing (request, announcement, etc.) and what you have to say about it (to purchase new desk chairs, of vacancy in the Finance Department).
- **Narrowcast, don't broadcast.** Resist the temptation to send copies to everyone. Restrict your e-mail to those who need to know.
- **Format for easy reading.** Make paragraphs short; use vertical lists to condense information. If the e-mail is long, begin with a brief overview describing what will follow.
- **Proof before you click.** ALL CAPS is hard to read, as is all lower case. Use conventional spelling and punctuation so your reader doesn't have to guess what you mean.