

HOW IMPORTANT ARE BUSINESS WRITING SKILLS?

by Rob Webb

Many of us brought up in the UK in the seventies and eighties received little formal training in the use of English language. In those 'enlightened' days the emphasis was placed less on the differences between nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, and more on individuals' abilities to get their ideas down on paper. Content became more important than the quality of the writing. Ironically, the first time many were seriously exposed to grammar, was when they tried to learn a foreign language.

As someone who spends much of his time training individuals to release their creative potential, and bemoaning the fact that creativity is not properly developed as a skill, you might think I'd be an advocate of a relaxed attitude towards English grammar, and writing skills in general. Experience has taught me however, that a basic understanding of grammar, and an ability to write effectively, are essential business skills.

We are all writers now; more so than at any point in our history. The secretary, who was often able to make sense of garbled dictation, is all but gone. Now, we do our own writing, whether it's letters, reports or, more commonly, email. Did you know that according to a recent survey we're now sending and receiving 35 billion email messages a day worldwide¹? That's a lot of writing.

Business writing is a skill that requires an efficient use of words, and an ability to follow the essential rules of language. These 'rules' are what we collectively refer to as grammar. Of these two elements, grammar has been the most obvious casualty of the enlightened education I referred to in my introduction. Many of us have a poor understanding of grammar, and errors litter business writing like confetti at a wedding.

So, why do errors matter? After all, the English language is an amazingly complex and constantly evolving tool, and even academics agree that it isn't easy to maintain a clear set of rules when our language is in a state of constant flux. As an illustration of just how much our language changes, consider for a moment that each new edition of a dictionary contains about 30,000 alterations or additions. Not only this, but the way we use words changes too. Fifty years ago it would have been considered inappropriate to start a sentence with the words 'and' or 'but' (although there seems no real basis for this). Today, it is generally recognised that starting a sentence with either is acceptable, in the right circumstances. In the USA, words like 'organization' are still spelt in the traditional (and strictly correct) way, with the 'z'. In the UK it has become common practice to spell such words with an 's', as in 'organisation'. This has left us with the slightly perplexing situation of being able to choose between alternative spellings for many words (though I do suggest you consistently apply whichever 'rule' you choose to adopt!) Add to all this things like the 'Oxford Comma', and other oddities, and it is easy to come to the conclusion that grammar is something far too high-brow for most of us to worry about.

Basic grammar is however, important. And to understand why it is important, we have to understand why it exists in the first place. All of those rules about how we use and spell words, and all of the little squiggles and dots we place beside or above words, which we call punctuation, have evolved for one reason – to aid communication.

When we use ‘their’ instead of ‘there’, or your instead of ‘you’re’ we are making sure the sentence makes sense to the readers. When we use commas, apostrophes, exclamation marks, colons and semi-colons, dashes, and more recently (love them or hate them) emoticons², we are adding signposts for the readers, helping them to understand our meaning. The readers know to pause when they see a full stop, and take a breath. They recognise the implications of an exclamation mark or a question mark at the end of the sentence. Every symbol affects, (or should affect), the way a passage is read.

Getting grammar wrong can not only make writing very difficult to understand, it can completely change its meaning. Look at the following two sentences:

“The butchers’ wives”

“The butcher’s wives”

The first refers to several butchers and their wives. The second refers to one butcher with several wives, and raises suspicions of bigamy. This is just one simple illustration. Lynne Truss’s book, “Eats, Shoots & Leaves”³, (which I recommend to anyone who’s not read it yet), contains many more, better, examples where poor grammar has completely altered the meaning of a sentence. One of the best examples, of course, is the title itself, where a misplaced comma completely alters the meaning.

Good grammar, like the internal workings of an efficient machine, goes largely unnoticed by the reader. Everything fits seamlessly together and the whole thing flows. The reader silently interprets the writing, and is usually able to understand not just what is being said, but often *how* it is being said too. When grammar is wrong, it jars with the reader. It’s rather like the sinking feeling you get when your car, or washing machine, makes a sudden, unexpected clunk. It grabs your attention; but for all the wrong reasons.

This creates a problem for readers - they’ll probably have to re-read the sentence to make sense of it - and a larger problem for the writer. The errors mean that the readers have been distracted from the purpose of the writing; their attention has been grabbed instead by the writer’s use of English. And, perhaps more importantly, the errors will damage the writer’s credibility with the readers. Too many errors and the writer’s credibility will be irreparably damaged.

If you doubt that poor writing loses the writer credibility, consider the following:

Two banks write to you, inviting you to move your accounts to them. Both letters are personally addressed to you, and use similar words to describe similar offers. One however, is well-written and contains no grammatical errors. The second is littered with errors, which are immediately apparent.

You have to re-read the second letter to make sense of it. Which bank are you most likely to trust not to make mistakes when managing your account?

If your answer is the first bank, you’ve just identified for yourself why business writing skills are so important.

I mentioned earlier that there were two elements to business writing, grammar, and an efficient use of words. Let’s look briefly now at words.

Writing seems to encourage a strange form of snobbery in many people. They seem to believe that using lots of very long, or rarely used, words in their letters and reports, (it happens less with email), will make them appear knowledgeable, and perhaps, powerful. Some cling to a single word for this authority: I'll always remember one colleague who would slip the word 'anathema' into almost every letter he wrote, knowing full well the reader wouldn't understand it. (He was using the word wrongly anyway, as it happens).

Let me make one thing absolutely clear. Good writing is not about using long or complex words. The purpose of writing is to communicate an idea or information to others. Communication is a two way process – it has to be understood and interpreted correctly by the recipient. Otherwise, what chance have you got of influencing the reader to act upon your message? And, if you don't want them to act or think differently, why are you writing in the first place? The best way to ensure your message is understood, and acted upon, is to use clear, simple, easy-to-understand words.

In conclusion, developing our employees' business writing skills is as important as developing their oral communication skills, their negotiation skills, or even, (important as they are), their creative thinking skills! Language is the main tool we use to persuade and influence others. There's little point in identifying the next great innovation, if you can't articulate your idea in a way that grabs attention and persuades others to adopt it. And, whilst I'd like more persuasion to occur face to face, the reality is that in all aspects of business we are often reliant on our business writing skills to persuade others to take action, including customers, colleagues and bosses.

But let's always remember, when training people to write better, *why* it's important. It's not about encouraging everyone to use long words, and most people probably don't need to understand what an Oxford comma is. The important things to consider, when helping individuals develop their writing skills are:

- Does the writer's use of words help the reader to easily understand the message being delivered?
- Does the writer's use of grammar affect the writer's credibility as an expert in the subject they are writing about?

This second question is important. Try not to judge an individual as a writer, but as a messenger. Few, if any of us, are perfect writers, but with a little care and thought our readers won't be distracted from our message by our poor choice of words, or grammar.