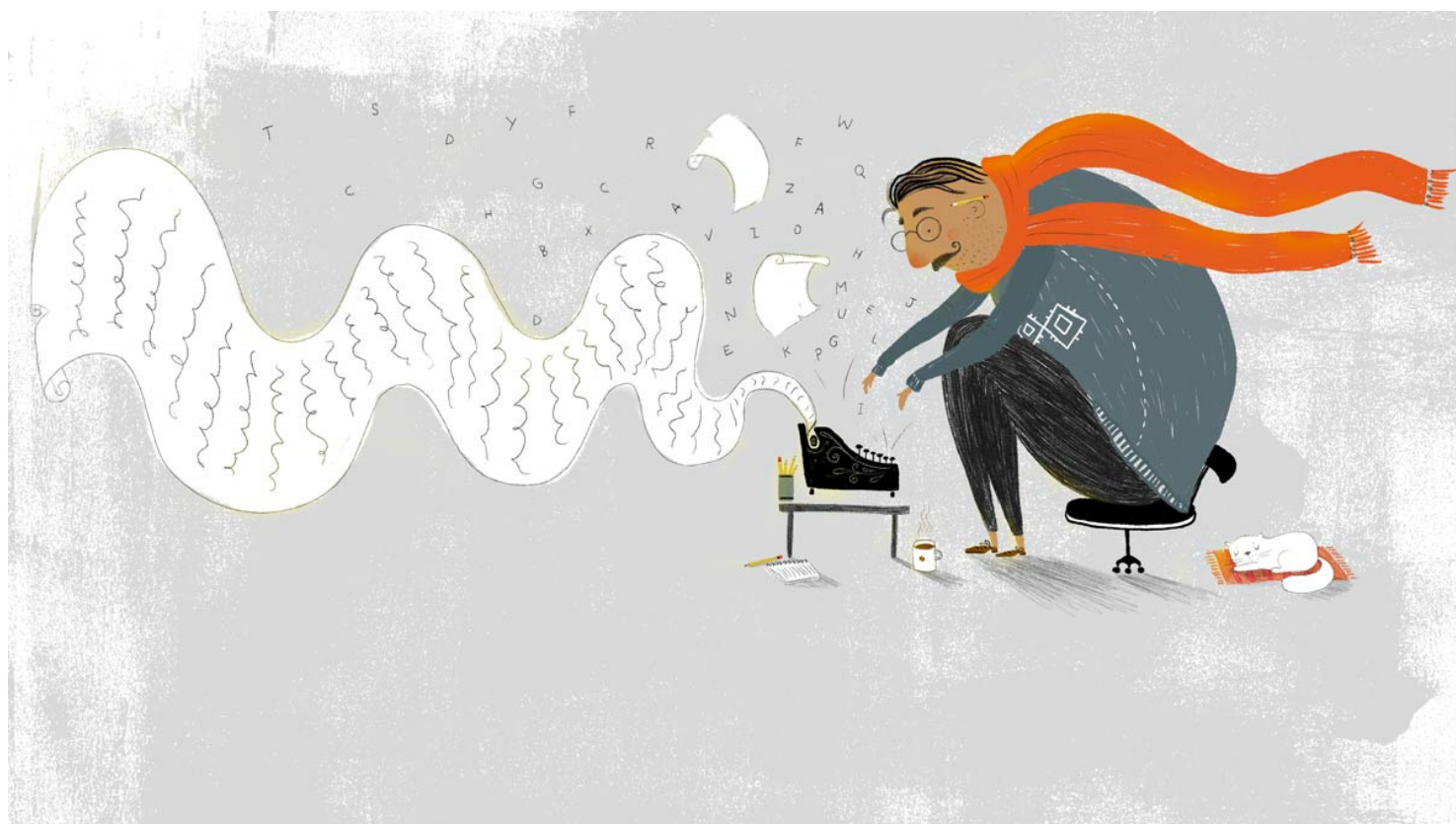


How to Improve Your Business Writing

by Carolyn O'Hara

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You probably write on the job all the time: proposals to clients, memos to senior executives, a constant flow of emails to colleagues. But how can you ensure that your writing is as clear and effective as possible? How do you make your communications stand out?

What the Experts Say

Overworked managers with little time might think that improving their writing is a tedious or even frivolous exercise. But knowing how to fashion an interesting and intelligent sentence is essential to communicating effectively, winning business, and setting yourself apart. “As Marvin Swift memorably said, clear writing means clear thinking,” said Kara Blackburn, a senior lecturer in managerial communication at the MIT Sloan School of Management. “You can have all the great ideas in the world and if you can’t communicate, nobody will hear them.” Luckily, everyone has the capacity to improve, says Bryan Garner, author of *The HBR Guide to Better Business Writing*. Effective writing “is not a gift that you’re born with,” he says. “It’s a skill that you cultivate.” Here’s how to write simply, clearly, and precisely.

Think before you write

Before you put pen to paper or hands to keyboard, consider what you want to say. “The mistake that many people make is they start writing prematurely,” says Garner. “They work out the thoughts as they’re writing, which makes their writing less structured, meandering, and repetitive.” Ask yourself: What should my audience know or think after reading this email, proposal, or report? If the answer isn’t immediately clear, you’re moving too quickly. “Step back and spend more time collecting your thoughts,” Blackburn advises.

Be direct

Make your point right up front. Many people find that the writing style and structure they developed in school doesn’t work as well in the business world. “One of the great diseases of business writing is postponing the message to the middle part of the writing,” says Garner. By succinctly presenting your main idea first, you save your reader time and sharpen your argument before diving into the bulk of your writing. When writing longer memos and proposals, Garner suggests stating the issue and proposed solution in “no more than 150 words” at the top of the first page. “Acquire a knack for summarizing,” he says. “If your opener is no good, then the whole piece of writing will be no good.”

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Cut the fat

Don’t “use three words when one would do,” says Blackburn. Read your writing through

It's a skill every leader needs to master.

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critical eyes, and make sure that each word works toward your larger point. Cut every unnecessary word or sentence. There's no need to say "general consensus of opinion,"

for instance, when "consensus" will do. "The minute readers feel that a piece of writing is verbose they start tuning out," says Garner. He suggests deleting prepositions (*point of view* becomes *viewpoint*); replacing *-ion* words with action verbs (*provided protection to* becomes *protected*); using contractions (*don't* instead of *do not* and *we're* instead of *we are*); and swapping *is*, *are*, *was* and *were* with stronger verbs (*indicates* rather than *is indicative of*).

Avoid jargon and \$10 words

Business writing is full of industry-specific buzzwords and acronyms. And while these terms are sometimes unavoidable and can occasionally be helpful as shorthand, they often indicate lazy or cluttered thinking. Throw in too many, and your reader will assume you are on autopilot – or worse, not understand what you're saying. "Jargon doesn't add any value," says Blackburn, but "clarity and conciseness never go out of style." Garner suggests creating a "buzzword blacklist" of words to avoid, including terms like "actionable," "core competency," "impactful," and "incentivize." You should also avoid using grandiose language. Writers often mistakenly believe using a big word when a simple one will do is a sign of intelligence. It's not.

Read what you write

Put yourself in your reader's shoes. Is your point clear and well structured? Are the sentences straightforward and concise? Blackburn suggests reading passages out loud. "That's where those flaws reveal themselves: the gaps in your arguments, the clunky sentence, the section that's two paragraphs too long," she says. And don't be afraid to ask a colleague or friend – or better yet, several colleagues and friends – to edit your work. Welcome their feedback; don't resent it. "Editing is an act of friendship," says Garner. "It is not an act of aggression."

Practice every day

“Writing is a skill,” says Blackburn, “and skills improve with practice.” Garner suggests reading well-written material every day, and being attentive to word choice, sentence structure, and flow. “Start paying attention to the style of *The Wall Street Journal*,” he says. Invest in a guide to style and grammar for reference – Garner recommends *Fowler’s Modern English Usage*. Most importantly, build time into your schedule for editing and revising. “Writing and reworking your own writing is where the change happens, and it’s not quick,” says Blackburn. “The time is well spent because good writers distinguish themselves on the job.”

Principles to Remember:

Do:

- Plan out what you will say to make your writing more direct and effective.
- Use words sparingly and keep sentences short and to the point.
- Avoid jargon and “fancy” words. Strive for clarity instead.

Don’t:

- Argue that you simply can’t write. Anyone can become a better writer with practice.
- Pretend that your first draft is perfect, or even passable. Every document can be improved.
- Bury your argument. Present your main idea as soon as possible.

Case study #1: Don’t be afraid to share

When David McCombie began working as a management consultant at McKinsey & Company, he immediately realized that the writing style he’d honed at Harvard Law School wasn’t well suited for executive-level communications. “It was the structure of my arguments,” David says. “I was getting feedback that I needed to get to the point more quickly.”

With legal or academic writing, “you’re going to generally start with building up the case, and put the main point all the way at the end,” he says. “But in business communications, it’s best to start with your conclusion first.”

To make his writing more direct and effective, David asked several senior colleagues for all of their past presentations and reports so that he could mimic key elements of their format and style. He also copied trusted colleagues who were particularly skilled communicators on important emails and asked for their feedback.

David has carried these practices to the private equity firm he founded in Miami, the McCombie Group. “I send anything that’s important to my partner and he reads it over,” David says, adding that he knows better than to take the edits personally. “We talk about whether there is a better way to convey an idea, how we can be more succinct.”

Improving his writing has had a direct effect on David’s ability to become an influential voice in his field. He’s currently writing a book on his private equity firm’s niche market, *The Family Office Practitioner’s Guide to Direct Investments*.

“Even if I knew good business writing from the get-go, I think continually improving your writing and taking it to the next level is absolutely key to success,” David says. “The more you do it, the easier it becomes.”

Case study #2: Study good writing

Tim Glowa had already built a successful career as a strategic marketing consultant when he decided to set his ambitions a little higher. “I wanted to be perceived as a thought leader,” Tim says, “and to do that, I needed to have a point of view and I needed to put that point of view out in public.”

He knew that crafting smart, digestible op-eds and research papers was key to improving his professional reputation. His writing was already well received by colleagues and peers but much of his experience was rooted in academic writing. So he began reading business publications, like *McKinsey Quarterly*, for style. “I studied how they communicate,” Tim says, “and made an effort to make my own writing more direct and concise.”

He also incorporated an outlining ritual into his writing. Before writing reports and memos, he now begins with a short outline of the three main objectives. “You can’t just start typing and expect to go somewhere,” he says. “That’s like going for a walk and not knowing where the destination is.”

Tim, now the cofounder of a marketing analytics firm called Bug Insights, believes the efforts have made him a more effective communicator, improving not just his longer writings, but his emails and even his voicemails. “It filters down into virtually all my communication,” he says. And his work is finding an audience. Several of his papers have been downloaded more than 100,000 times, and a Fortune 50 company recently used one of his papers in an internal training and development program.

Tim is gratified at his progress, but says he’s not going to stop putting in the extra effort. “You have to work at it,” he says. “Anytime you develop a new skill, you have to study it.”

Carolyn O’Hara is a writer and editor based in New York City. She’s worked at *The Week*, *PBS NewsHour*, and *Foreign Policy*.

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