

Home » About CGA-Canada » CGA Magazine » 2005 » Jan-Feb » Writing for Results

Writing for Results

Further than Figures

Writing for Results

What you might not have learned in your high-school English class...

FROM: JAN-FEB 2005 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

Consider this situation: your firm is one of two final contenders bidding on a large project. It's down to the wire, and the only thing separating you from a signed contract is your written response to the issues raised in the final discussions. Time is of the essence, and you don't want there to be any unanswered questions, so you submit a 50-page report compiling responses from several of your technical specialists. Your competitor, meanwhile, offers up an eight-page document that succinctly captures the information the client is seeking. Who do you think will get the business? If you guessed your competitor, you're probably right.

Now consider this very different situation. You're seeking a new business manager for your branch office. In response to your newspaper advertisement, the résumés are pouring in. As you sift your way through the stack on your desk, you note that several cover letters have been carelessly prepared — they haven't been proofread for spelling and grammatical errors, and in some cases the applicants haven't responded to specific questions in the advertisement. How likely are you to invite these candidates in for an interview? If you said "not likely," you're part of the significant majority.

While these two scenarios seem quite different, they have one important common element: the key decision factor in both these situations was the quality of the writing. In today's business world, people judge you on how well you can communicate in writing. You may think it is unfair and you may not like it, but people make assumptions about your intelligence, your ability to get the job done, and even your credibility based on your written word.

Whether it's a brief memo, a full-fledged report, or even just a quick e-mail, you are creating an impression. The assumption, right or wrong, is that if you haven't mastered the seemingly simple art of communicating in writing, you likely haven't mastered the more complicated arts of providing financial advice or offering business counsel. And that can put you at a significant disadvantage.

The good news is that this is a shortcoming easily fixed, simply by applying some conscious thought and effort. Here are some key fundamentals that you might not have learned in your high-school English class.

Be Reader-Centred

Begin any piece of writing at the end. This is known as the "call to action" and you must be sure to state it in the body of your text, particularly if it requires action from the reader. What do you want your reader to do after reading your missive? Do you want the reader to take action, make a decision, or gain information? A second question to ask yourself is whether the reader will be receptive to your message or not. If the message is a positive one (from the reader's perspective), then you should get right to the point. A negative message, on

the other hand, requires a little more finesse. Start by empathizing with the reader's point of view, followed by a short explanation. Then state the bad news in a positive manner, and end by offering alternatives.

Your readers are busy people, and if you want them to follow through on your "call to action," you need to make it easy for them. Use shorter paragraphs and broad margins. Where you can, offer information in bulleted or numbered lists. Highlight or boldface information for clarity; in other words, be reader-centred.

Use the Active Voice

"All service charges accumulated in the last three months on your account have been removed." Compare it to "I have removed all accumulated service charges from your account." Which statement is more powerful? One statement uses the passive voice and the other the active voice. In any sentence, there is an actor (the person or thing performing the action), the action (the verb), and a receiver (the person or thing receiving the action).

In the active voice, the actor is in front of the action, while in the passive voice, the receiver is in front of the action. In business writing, the active voice is preferable as it sends a more powerful message. There are a few specific situations when the passive voice is more appropriate, such as when the actor is not known or not important, or when tact requires that you not identify the actor. By the way, if you picked "I have removed all accumulated service charges from your account" as the active voice, and therefore the more powerful sentence in a business context, you'd be right.

Simplify

There is a movement afoot to be more conversational in business writing. This does not mean that you should be colloquial, just not as formal as you might have been in the past. After all, nobody would say "pursuant to your instructions, we have enclosed herewith a photographic reproduction of your original purchase order," so you shouldn't write like that either. Instead, you should write like you talk — "We've enclosed a photocopy of your original purchase order."

Avoid Wordiness

Whenever you can, use one word instead of many. There is no reason to write "in order to" or "in the event of." These could easily be replaced with "to" or "if." Beware also of the much-overused conjunctions "that" and "which." Look through a recent document you've written, and you'll quickly see that most instances of "that" and "which" can be removed without affecting your message.

When you write for business, target your writing to a reader who is at the grade 6-8 level. If you use Word or WordPerfect, click on Tools, then Options, and check Readability Statistics. The next time you run a spelling and grammar check on your document, you will receive an onscreen report giving you the grade level, percentage of passive sentences, and several other evaluative measures of your writing.

Use Correct Grammar and Punctuation

For many of you, grammar may bring back not-so-fond memories of elementary school, but the good news is that correct grammar, proper punctuation, and intelligent word choices do not require you to go back to school. Instead, you can achieve the same results by investing in a high-quality style guide such as the *Franklin-Covey Style Guide* or the *Gregg Reference Manual*.

These are easy-to-use reference books that give definitive answers to all the questions you might ever have on these subjects. If you've never used a semi-colon because you weren't sure how, or if you've ever wondered how to get subjects to agree with verbs, or whether to use "who" or "whom," then a style guide can help. The key to using good grammar and punctuation is not to learn or relearn these subjects (because, let's face it, no

one ever really gets excited about grammar), but to recognize that you can look it up in a style guide. Make the investment: it's worth every penny!

Proofread

Always proofread what you have written. Ideally, you want to put some "distance" between you and your document, preferably overnight, but if that's not possible, leave it for at least two hours. Looking at a document after you have been away from it for a while allows you to pick up errors you might not otherwise catch.

Remember: people make judgments about your abilities, intelligence, and credibility based on your written communication skills. Give them the right impression.

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