



Excerpts from
Words at Work: Powerful business writing delivers increased sales, improved results, and even a promotion or two.
by
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Introduction

Does writing well still matter in a time of e-mail, texting, and Twitter?

You bet it does.

Writing is so much more than stringing words together. The process of writing can help you clarify your thoughts and uncover ideas you didn't know you had. Writing well can deliver increased sales, improved results, and even a promotion or two.

I admit that as a professional writer for 25 years and a business writing coach for five, I'm hopelessly in love with words: their flow, their nuance, their message. At the same time, I appreciate what a boon to business e-mail and text-messaging can be. Quick questions, fast answers, no postage—I'm all for them! But somewhere along the way, we're losing our ability to write.

When you write only short e-mail and text messages, your ability to develop your thoughts shrivels, along with your ability to persuade, sell, teach, improve, guide, change, contribute, and create. *Words at Work* is about learning how to tap into your deepest thoughts and present them in an organized and compelling way. It's about thinking big and writing big.

Nothing to fear but...

While living on my farm, I discovered a lot of things about writing by observing nature. My favorite lesson—there is a season for everything—taught me that there is a time to plan, a time to work, a time to rest, and a time to reap the rewards of all that effort. It makes perfect sense. No one sits down and writes something brilliant. It takes time pondering and planning, writing and editing. I learned that writing is more like picking blackberries than huckleberries. Huckleberries, heavy bunches hanging low in August, fall into your bucket with the slightest nudging. Every now and then that happens with

writing—the words just tumble out. But more often, writing is like picking blackberries—thorny patches keeping your ideas just out of reach. But keep stretching, and you’ll get to the good stuff. Like that cobbler cooling on the windowsill. Most of these obstacles boil down to fear. Fear of getting it “wrong.” Fear of not finishing. Fear of finishing. And there’s nothing unusual about that. Everyone feels—some more often than others—that fear of a blank screen or empty pad of paper. Fear makes us think we have no interest in writing. Clients tell me they hate to write, but later I find that they’re afraid to write because someone—their boss, client, or even that ornery editor in their own head—is standing by to criticize. It makes us freeze, procrastinate, even clean our offices before we write. But when that fear is lifted, when people understand how important writing is to their careers and that everyone can learn to write, incredible things happen.

Ornery Editor

In Chapter One, I mentioned a season for everything. That certainly applies to ornery editor (OE). Who’s that? As if we don’t get enough grief from bosses and know-it-alls, most of us carry around this voice inside our head, the one making annoying—even crippling—remarks like, *“This is really bad. You’ll never get this article sold. Man, how can you keep doing this? You ought to quit!”* And, of course, he picks on your first drafts. While I learned that I can’t make my OE go away, I’ve trained myself to ignore him while I’m writing early drafts. That’s essential. You need the space to experiment and try again. Keep your OE as far away from the writing process as possible. Otherwise he’ll do his best to make you give up or churn out something tried and true like everyone else. But I also learned that I needed to let my OE back in during my editing process. That’s when he just might have something valuable to say. *“That’s too long. That doesn’t feel right. Something’s clunky. I don’t think your readers will understand that. Can’t you find a more exciting verb than ‘is’?”* I can’t tell you how often, when I felt tired or lazy, I’d ignore his promptings—usually an uneasy feeling in my gut about a certain paragraph—only to have an editor criticize that very paragraph.

Tools of the trade

I learned a lot from ... journalists and copywriters. I enjoyed picking up the paper and reading their articles. And once I realized how much journalism meant to me, I set about learning all I could from them. So, let’s explore some of the best techniques journalism offers to writers in the business world.

Inverted Pyramid

This journalist’s tool looks like an upside-down pyramid—with the tip pointing down and the broad base at the top. It’s a great icon to keep in mind as you organize anything you’re writing—from a letter or e-mail to a report or newsletter article. It looks like what your document should look like—stacked right from the beginning with the best stuff on top and winding down to a well-rounded finish.

Six Wise Men

The Six Wise Men are classic reporter questions: who, why, what, where, when, and how. With some exceptions, they all need to be answered to make your document complete. I use them as a safety net—if I’ve answered all six in my writing, I feel confident that I’ve covered all the bases.

Deconstruction

The inspiration for deconstruction struck while I was visiting an art museum. The text panel explained that Degas and Cassatt applied for permits to the Louvre to copy the Great Masters. I was stunned. It had never occurred to me that it was okay to copy greatness. Wasn’t that cheating? Weren’t we taught in school never to copy? For writers, doesn’t that edge dangerously close to plagiarism? Eventually, though, I realized that deconstruction, like artists at the Louvre, was simply an exercise, not a finished product. Degas and Cassatt developed their own unmistakable styles—they just wanted to practice techniques and prime their creativity at the same time.

We learn by example, by mimicking greatness until it feels natural to us. To translate that for writing, instead of envying other writers, I needed to take a closer look at what I admired about their work. I needed to study greatness. While teaching myself to write, I spent hours poring over books and magazines. I made copious notes of how the writers handled their information. I earmarked pages until the magazine didn’t close right.

Corporatespeak

Today, as a business writing coach, I help people break off their love affair with six syllables when one works even better. I’ve read some paragraphs so convoluted I had to ask clients to explain what they were trying to say to their readers. When they start talking, their thoughts come out fresh and clear. I stop them before they forget what they just said and tell them, “Put that down!” I keep a file of bad examples because some of them are unimaginable. You couldn’t make it up if you tried.

1. *“The purpose of this report is to clarify the communications endeavor we discussed and further develop the necessary components for review by the board, inasmuch as...”*

2. *“The process, if accelerated through the strategic channels in the allotted timeframe, will leverage our deployment as an immeasurable uniqueness in the marketplace.”*

Relax. Be yourself. Use plain English. Write in an open, honest style. Don’t try too hard. Conversational writing is in. Large words and convoluted sentences don’t get the message across. Just talk to your readers. In turn, you’ll increase sales, eliminate misunderstandings, and achieve goals faster.

WIIFM - What's in it for me?

That's what all readers are thinking, consciously or not. And you've got 10 seconds to convince them you understand their needs. It's easy to talk about yourself, your products, and your services and assume that readers make the jump to how those features will benefit them. They don't. First, you need to ask, interview, and watch so you understand what they want and need. Then, you need to write *to* them, address *their* needs, concerns, and problems. As a result, you'll grab their attention and keep them engaged.

How to get where you want to go

Think of your writing as a bus making its way through traffic. All the best words and phrases are on board, along with your features and benefits. And the proper use of commas, periods, and dashes (like road signs) are making the ride smoother for your readers. But who's driving the bus? If it's you (the writer), that bus is headed in the wrong direction. Put your reader in the driver's seat, and that bus is speeding toward the results you both need. As you let the reader drive your bus, you'll share benefits and results they care about (rather than all the features you're so proud of).

Telling tales for fun and profit

Observation is one of the best ways to develop stories. Pay attention to anecdotes in everyday life—and write them down. (Your memory really isn't as good as you think.) As a reporter, I've honed the skills of looking and listening. I eavesdrop at restaurants and on buses (and hear the most amazing things). One of my favorite observations took place on the highest summit in Georgia, Brasstown Bald (4,784 feet). Ten years later, I used their exchange for a lead in an article about wildflowers.

*Two women walking in the woods stopped to investigate a shock of red
against the muted
forest floor.*

*“What's that?” one asked.
“Oh, nothing,” the other said. “Just an old
wildflower.”*

*I overheard this exchange almost 20 years ago, but I still can't believe my
ears. They stood before petals of red, dew-dotted emerald leaves, pistils
laden with gold, fragrance as sweet as the senses can register—a flower that
had returned year after year through too much rain and too little, through
winter's cold and summer's heat. And they dissed it?*

Listen to what your customers, employees, bosses—whomever you're writing to—have to say. Eavesdrop. Ask questions. What do they like? What would make their lives easier? In a perfect world, what do they hope you can deliver? Shape your documents to respond to their needs. Remember that our biggest task in business writing is to write to our reader, not just dump our information on them. Stories increase your readers' ability to grasp your information. Instead of deadly diatribes or boring PowerPoints, share stories, scenarios, situations, and case studies.