



## Association for Creative Business Writing

### **Write Right**

*Start writing like the professional you are.*

Remember the Battle of Hastings? Maybe a fuzzy 1066. How about trigonometry? Doubtful. So why do we feel embarrassed about not remembering Ms. McGuire's 6th-grade English class?

After all, for many of us, it's been a while. For others, they never learned it. Add in the speedy demands of e-mail and overflowing in-boxes, and no wonder our business writing has become the literary equivalent of fast food: slapped together, full of fat, and hard to digest.

Everyone needs a tune-up from time to time, but few take the time. Improving our writing is like cleaning the basement: We know it needs to be done, but things just keep piling up and we get used to the chaos. In other words, familiarity breeds unkempt—which is exactly what happens when our grammatical slips are showing.

#### **Making mumbo-jumbo**

Somewhere along the way, our writing took a wrong turn. We discovered “corporatespeak” and lost the ability to string clear, concise thoughts together.

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

Translation: “If we hurry up, we can get there first.”

Corporatespeak is a big reason M.B.A. programs and business schools recently added writing classes to their curriculum. Which means we're in good company, so let's get started brushing up on business writing basics.

#### **Plan more, write less**

When a reporter asked Albert Einstein how he'd solve a crisis if he had only one hour, he answered that he'd spend 55 minutes planning and 5 minutes executing. Professional writers agree—though we don't go quite that far. On average, we spend approximately 50 percent of our time planning, 20 percent writing and 30 percent editing.

You'll be amazed at how much faster your writing goes when you know where you're headed. As you plan, think about not only what you want to convey to your audience, but who that audience is. Ask yourself:

- What level of understanding will they bring?
- Will they be reluctant readers? Attentive? Passive?
- Are they superiors? Peers? Employees?
- What is their education level?
- How long can you hold their attention?

### **Overcoming fears**

My clients often share how much they fear writing, whether it's a white paper, a board report, or just a letter. They put it off, then dash something off, and invariably get disappointing results. The antidote? Simply start. Anywhere. Try a brain dump. In just five or ten minutes you can get your key thoughts down. Now push them around into a logical sequence. Picture the journalist's inverted pyramid—a triangle resting on its point—to help you stack your most important information first, supportive facts next, and finally an ending that sums up your point. There, you've got a first draft.

Okay, it's terrible, but guess what? *Everyone* writes a terrible first draft. Editing can turn it into a good second draft, a terrific third draft and a fabulous fourth.

### **Cut, Catch & Correct**

Sound like a lot of extra work? Don't edit in long tedious stretches—run through it in short bursts, ideally with a break in between. Go through once for accuracy. Next session, make it more concise. Your readers will reward you by reading to the end and responding to your requests (which you've stated early in the document and again at the end, right?)

As you edit your work, strive for an open, honest style. Large words may illustrate your impressive vocabulary, but they rarely connect with your readers. (Sometimes they do, in which case, keep the Brobdingnagian words.)

Conversational is the way to go. Write like you talk, and you'll find that more people will want to read your document—and finish reading it. Which, after all, is why you wrote it in the first place.

### **Write Right: Eight tips to jump-start your writing and polish your prose.**

1. Relax. Write conversationally. Tell a good story.
2. Do a brain dump. Get your ideas down and arrange in logical order.
3. Remember that first drafts aren't really writing—they're thought organizers.
4. Let them know what you want through strong conclusions and compelling calls-to-action.
5. Edit, edit, and edit some more until the document is clear and concise.
6. Get creative: Use vivid verbs rather than boring "is, are, and were."
7. Take Albert Einstein's other advice: Don't memorize anything you can look up. Buy a good reference guide (such as Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*) and use it—regularly.
8. Sleep on it—then edit again. Mistakes jump off the page.

For more tips, tools, and tricks of the trade, check out the Association for Creative Business Writing at [www.afcbw.com](http://www.afcbw.com).