

Topic: Message Writing

Effective communication is vital to success in business; this includes all forms of verbal and written communication. This topic includes some concrete things you can do to improve the quality and effectiveness of the business messages that you write.

Before words are set down on a page the needs of the audience have to be taken into account, as they will inform the way you frame the information you are presenting. When we begin to write we almost always know what we want to say, but too often we are not of the tone of our writing from the perspective of the receiver of the message. Considering tone is not essential to what we have to say, but it is absolutely vital to how the message is received and understood. With an understanding of how to use powerful language, we can focus the receiver's attention on the important point of the sentence or paragraph. Creating paragraphs that are coherent, which flow and make sense to the reader and exist in coherent context of each other can get the important points of your message across clearly and effectively.

Subtopics

- Message Writing: Audience Needs
- Message Writing: Tone
- Message Writing: Powerful Language
- Message Writing: Coherent Paragraphs

Subtopic: Audience Needs

When you are informing a group of sales directors about a shift in the product line, establish from the start how popular and saleable the new line promises to be. That is the fact about it that means the most to them. That is what they need to hear about the topic. If you are informing the CFO and her staff about the same shift, you might choose to lead your message with the profitability, lower manufacturing cost, greater margins, and larger potential market. This is an example of allowing the audience's needs to drive the structure of your message.

Using the pronoun "you" rather than "I" can make the receiver feel like the message is directed at them rather than about them. Consider the example "I want to congratulate you on the latest sales numbers" as opposed to "Your latest sales numbers have made you the number one in this district for the last three quarters, congratulations." The latter is much more empowering and supportive.

- Adapt your message to your audience's needs. This can include:
 - Focus on the audience's point of view.
 - Using the word "you" will allow your audience to feel like the message is directed to them.
 - Use of the first person "I" can make the preparer of the message appear to be self-focused.
 - Use simple contemporary language
 - Write concisely
 - Project a positive tone
- Communicate ethically and responsibly to establish rapport and good will, This involves:
 - Make sure that the information you supply is as truthful, honest, and fairly presented as possible.

- Do not allow your message to embellish or exaggerate facts.
- All ideas should be expressed understandably and clearly.
- Make sure you support your viewpoint with objective facts.
- State ideas with tact and consideration for both the reader and the subject of the message – do not speak ill of anyone, betray trusts, or indulge in excessive criticism of blame.
- Make sure that ideas are stated tactfully and considerately.
- Be certain that any graphics do not distort facts or relationships.
- Is your audience internal or external?
- Identifying and profiling your audience you can write more specifically to them.

Subtopic: Tone

Subtle differences in words choice or word order can impact the tone that your message takes. A pleasant and cordial professional tone should be your standard in all business messages. There may be rare occasions to take a different tone, but they will be few and far between. Following the rules outlined below will lead you to an impactful and effective tone.

- Express from the positive perspective rather than the negative. Positive language focuses on what can be rather than what cannot be. “Repairs on your motorcycle will be completed by December 12” is much better than “we will not be able to repair your car by December 3, as originally scheduled.” Avoid using negative words and words (or phrases) with negative connotations.
- Maintain a courteous tone. This requires that you actively avoid sounding preachy or demanding. Phrases such as “you must,” “you should,” or “you have to” sound insistent and demanding and often elicit a negative kneejerk reaction by the receiver. Phrases like “would you please” are much more likely to get a positive response.
- Avoid sarcasm or any display of anger. Your goals, your purpose as a business communicator is to inform, to create goodwill, to gain the support of – and anger or sarcasm will never achieve your goals. If you are communicating with someone who is angry or sarcastic, do your best to defuse the situation.
- Always opt for bias-free language. You will not set out to be offensive, but it is possible to offend unintentionally. Be aware that innocently written or spoken words might imply bias based on gender, race, ethnicity, age, or disability. Do not discuss age, race, gender, ethnicity, or ability unless it is absolutely pertinent.
 - Favor gender neutral words like “Postal worker.” Rather than discussing “executives and their wives” (which presupposes that all executives are male),
 - Avoid offensive age descriptions like referring to “old people” rather than “people over sixty-five,” or “a sprightly old gentleman” rather than simply “a man.”
 - Do not refer to race or ethnicity unless it is pertinent. Instead of reporting that an “Indian sales manager” was hired, you can report that a “sales manager” was hired.
 - Instead of referring to a person as “crippled with arthritis,” simply say that the person “has arthritis.”
- Speak plainly – plain language and familiar words. Avoid letting your business messages to be written in big words in order to sound authoritative. You are better off using “ask” rather than “interrogate;” “confuse” rather than “obfuscate;” or “appear” rather than “materialize.”

- Use words precisely and correctly and choose vigorous words. Be specific to the extent possible. Rather than saying “an increase in profits,” say “a 37% increase in profits.” Say that you are going to analyze and diagnose a problem rather than think about the problem.

Subtopic: Powerful Language

The most powerful word in the English language is “you.” Writing any thought in the context of the readers’ perspective is the strongest way to make any statement. Here are the important points to remember in addition to the use of “you,” to make your writing powerful and effective.

Write sentences in which the subject is the one who performs the action.

- Write sentences in the context of the reader’s perspective – make use of the strongest word in the English language, “you.”
- Almost always write in an active voice. (“Our marketing team rolls out their new campaign at the Super Bowl is active, while “Our new marketing campaign will be rolled out at the Super Bowl” is not.)
- Use the passive voice when:
 - You want to conceal the doer of the action (as in “Inventory shortages will be addressed” rather than “The sales office has created shortages in inventory which will be addressed.”).
 - .You want to emphasize what was done rather than who did it.
 - You want to avoid finger pointing
- While you should not emphasize every word, stress al of your important ideas. You can create this emphasis by:
 - the structure of your sentences . Simple sentences emphasize the thought. To emphasize, word the important idea as a dependent clause. A simple sentence is more emphatic than a compound sentence, and a compound sentence is more emphatic than a complex sentence.
 - the use of repetition. Repeating the same word more than once in a sentence can add emphasis to that word.
 - using labeling words. Starting a sentence with the qualifier, “But most important of all” tells the reader that this point is the most important one.
 - sentence position. The word or clause that either opens or closes the sentence is in the best position to be the important word of the thought, and the first or last word or clause in a paragraph is usually the strongest one. For example, the sentence “Our efforts were rewarded with success, but only after much adversity.” Is not as powerful as the sentence “Success came, but only after much struggle.”
 - Properly using space and format. A longer amount of print space or speaking time devoted to a topic indicates that it is more important.

Subtopic: Coherent Paragraphs

Paragraphs are coherent when the ideas connect and one logically leads to the next. Remember that when you write, you are taking your readers on a journey; make sure they have all of the necessary steps to be able to follow you on that journey.

- Paragraphs should contain a topic sentence that clearly identifies the idea being discussed and presents the central idea of the paragraph. A paragraph that puts this sentence first is called a deductive paragraph, and one that ends with this sentence is called an inductive paragraph.
- Sustain the key idea. Repeat the key word or expression throughout the paragraph to keep the thoughts connected to the key concept.
- Dovetail sentences. When the idea at the end of a sentence connects with the idea of the beginning of the next, which is referred to as dovetailing sentence. For instance “New employees are told from the outset that each customer is a treasured guest. As important guests we want each customer made to feel as if we are pleased to have them in our store.”
- Include pronouns. Both familiar pronouns and demonstrative pronouns confirm that the same topic is being discussed. Make sure that the meanings of pronouns are clear and that any reader could understand which nouns the pronouns refer to.
- Use Transitional Expressions. These expressions can help to build a much more coherent sentence. Using “accordingly” in place of “for instance;” “again” in place of “I mean;” “beside” in place of “put another way” can build a stronger and more coherent paragraph.
- The arrangement of paragraphs. Readers of messages expect an initial paragraph to introduce a topic or issue and subsequent paragraphs to discuss and examine that issue. Make sure that you structure your paragraphs in a way that leads systematically from the initial investigation to the final summary. The final paragraph should link back to the opening paragraph in some way.
- Vary both sentence and paragraph length.
- Be careful that paragraphs do not run on too long. Paragraphs longer than eight lines should be reconsidered as several sequential paragraphs in a business communication.

Topic Review

Often we believe that if we have something important to say, people will be willing to work to hear it and to understand it. Unfortunately, if we fail to consider our audience’s needs, send a message in an off-putting tone, or put other barriers in their way people will give up on trying to understand your message. The greater the level of clarity and the “friendliness” with which you present your message, the more people will take away the points that you want them to. The above topics and techniques can help you to make your points by understanding your audience, understanding your own tone, using words powerfully to write coherent sentences and paragraphs.

Question(s) to Consider:

1. You are in danger of unintentionally offending people with the tone of your words. How do you best make sure that this does not happen?
2. How do you best develop a style of writing or speaking that employs the most powerful and effective language possible?
3. You want to write coherent paragraphs, but often find yourself drifting off focus. Is there a device that you can use to stay on task?
4. How do you write from the perspective of the audience’s needs?

Answers to Question(s) to Consider:

1. When you consider this potential problem initially, you will need to be aware of every word and phrase that you use. This kind of self-censoring can make you feel stilted and uncomfortable. The

good news is that after carefully monitoring yourself for a while you will find your vocabulary and word choices shifting to a tone that friendly and inclusive. Just as practicing a language makes you better at that language, practicing an inviting and friendly tone will begin to feel quite natural to you.

2. As you begin to regularly make word and phrase choices based on their power and effectiveness you will find this becoming second nature to you. As you begin shifting this aspect of how you form messages, you might find it helpful to keep a short bulleted list near your desktop to refer to.

3. If you begin your message with an outline, articulately stating the function that every paragraph plays in making your argument, you can keep your writing on task. For instance your opening paragraph states your main point. Paragraph two states what the research and data show and what they seem to indicate. Paragraphs three four and five lay out the research and data in each of the three main areas of examination. Paragraph six lists the three top suggestions for remediation. Paragraph seven puts those suggestions in order of preference and explains why. Paragraph eight recaps the problem and preferred solution.

4. You know what you want to communicate, but the question in every reader or listener's mind is, "what is in it for me?" Consider your message from their perspective and explain why it is important for them to get your message and heed its suggestions, rather than just putting the information forward.