

Business writing made easy

What effective writers really do

Ralph McKechnie Brown



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RALPH BROWN

BUSINESS WRITING MADE EASY

WHAT EFFECTIVE WRITERS
REALLY DO

Business writing made easy: What effective writers *really* do

1st edition

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ISBN 978-87-403-1723-7

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1 MAKING IT EASY

It's almost certainly going to be easier than you think.

Many people tell me they want to learn formal business writing. They assume that they need to study rules, phrases and words to make their letters and reports 'correct'.

Imagine how dry and complicated that would be. It would also be a waste of time because what we really want to do is make our writing easy to read, absorb and remember. Most likely, we'll also want to build a relationship with our reader.

It's best to think of formal business writing, what some people like to call Commercial English, as a convention. It's not a set of rules, because rules would suggest that they exist for logical reasons, or that there is some authority behind them. As we will see, there isn't.

Grammar is a little different. There are rules of grammar, but you can avoid many grammatical problems by writing in a simple style, close to conversation. You may have to check a grammar book occasionally, but some of the conventions of grammar are arbitrary and we can ignore them without offending or distracting our readers.

The alternative to learning grammar and the conventions is simpler, more useful and more fun.

Here's what we need to do first. Ask yourself this question: What do I really want to achieve by learning about business writing?

To get you started, here's what most people tell me:

I want people to read my emails, letters and reports – all the way through.

I want people to take action.

I want to have an impact.

I want to build relationships with my emails.

I want to spend less time writing my reports and proposals.

Think of this book as a resource to develop your writing and language skills generally – and not just in business. The principles of effective writing are the same, whether you are writing a business letter, email, report, copy for your website, a personal letter, novel, blog, letter to the editor, television script, or article for a community newspaper.

You'll discover how easy it is to use the power of the English language and how some conventions have made business writing unnecessarily complicated.

To be frank, most people write letters and reports that are impersonal, lifeless and cold. They begin letters with lines like, 'I am writing to you in regards your recent telephone call to us on March 28...' They're not cold or verbose people, they just write that way. They can show a real interest in a conversation on the telephone, then send you a confirming letter in formal, stock phrases that ignore the rapport they built with you.

The conventions may have made sense centuries ago, but many of them don't now and they are disappearing as business focuses on effective communication and building relationships. Even technology is helping the process along. The language of emails tends to be much less formal than faxes or letters.

We'll be comparing examples of writing, but don't be put off by the thought that making judgements about writing might be a bit daunting because you haven't trained as a critic of English usage. You have. You know when something sounds odd or when language is used inappropriately. Take a couple of those examples that circulate on the internet:

Our wines leave you nothing to hope for – *Menu in Swiss restaurant*

The Manager has personally passed all the water served here – *In a hotel in Acapulco*

If you're a fluent speaker of English, you'll know that you can interpret those sentences in other ways. It's a very complex language full of double meanings, subtlety and colourful, even idiom. When you are in a conversation the right words for the message, the occasion and the relationship arrive, just as you need them – most times. What an amazing skill.

Develop your ear for language by reading your work aloud routinely, especially to a willing colleague or partner.

You might be thinking that letters, reports and memos shouldn't be written for reading aloud, that written communication is, well, *different*. Quite right. It is different. In conversation they get the first draft almost every time. When we write, we have the chance to polish every sentence, but imagining a conversation with the same readers provides an excellent starting point.

After more than 30 years of examining my own professional writing, and the work of journalists, presenters, orators, business leaders, and the employees of businesses, government departments and local authorities, I'm convinced that six qualities of writing are enough to describe what modern professional writers do.

Let's call them *The Golden Rule* and the *Five Keys to Effective Writing*. You'll find them easy to learn and use in your own writing.

To make it simpler, they overlap. They're natural companions. Use one and you'll often find that you're using at least one other. They will give you a simple way to write and edit.

2 WHO'S IT FOR ANYWAY?

If we want our readers to read and remember, if we want them to sit up, concentrate, and go away with lasting memories, we have to be passionate about The Golden Rule of Writing.

Most writers believe they are focused on their readers, but they are not. It's easy to say, but our golden rule is a demanding discipline. It governs what we choose to include in our reports, letters and emails and every word, every sentence, every paragraph.

The Golden Rule of Writing
Focus on the reader

Put yourself in a reader-focused frame of mind whenever you write. Without the golden rule of writing, you cannot be effective.

Imagine your readers constantly. Focus on what your readers want to know, their background knowledge, their interest in the topic, their relationship with you and anything else about them that will help to make your communication effective. It's what you would do in business conversation or at a party, yet most people write for themselves. They cram in everything they want to say and assume that their readers or audience are just as interested in the content and just as knowledgeable as they are.

I like the word 'useful'. We should always be asking, 'Will my reader find this useful?' That one word will help you choose what facts or ideas to include, and also whether to use a particular word or sentence.

Putting your reader or your audience first won't stop you saying what you need to say, it will just make you more effective.

We have a saying around our office: 'It's not what you tell them that counts. It's what they remember. They'll remember if you make it relevant and interesting and talk to them in the language they know best – conversational English.'

A checklist for reader-focused writers

- Is this idea, word or paragraph useful for my reader?
- What information or assurances does my reader want?
- What's the reader's *occasion* – a board meeting or reading in the office?
- How well do I know this reader?
- How interested is my reader?
- Does my reader know less than me about the subject?
- Does my reader speak formally on the phone or in person?
- Is my reader more interested in facts and figures than relationships?
- Does my reader have a preference for summaries or details?
- Will my reader understand this concept, jargon or idea?
- How well does my reader understand English?
- How does my reader feel about me or the organisation?
- Does my reader share my sense of humour?

'It's not what you tell them that counts. It's what they remember.'

People say it's easy enough to focus on the reader if they are writing to one person, but they might be writing to thousands of people at a time. Yes, it is a complication, but a minor one. You may need to generalise about your readers, but that is not difficult to do, and it's certainly much better than writing with no thought for them.

If you think that some of your readers may be more interested in your topic than others, write for those who are especially interested. Try to drag in as many others as you can by supplying essential background and coming up with surprises that would motivate even a less interested reader to continue. Journalists do it every day.

If you are writing a report for both technical and non-technical readers, consider presenting your information in chunks. A summary in layperson's language might be enough to satisfy the non-technical or less motivated reader. You would provide more detail or technical information in the body of the report, maybe with panels that summarise each section or deal with separate technical issues. You could put the really technical stuff in an appendix.

3 THE FIVE KEYS TO EFFECTIVE WRITING

Isn't it convenient that the real differences between average and effective business writers come down to just six simple ideas?

The golden rule and the five keys will give you a practical writing and editing system. With very little practice, you'll find writing and editing much easier and you'll develop your skills in a more focused way than simply building up your experience.

The method uses the outstanding qualities of effective writing and provides us with a language for improving our writing. There's still room for judgement and you'll find that we use the word 'appropriate' often. Much of the skill is in using the five keys appropriately.



I know what you're thinking.

You're tempted to skip this section because it's obvious. It's the old *KISS* principle, right? Stay with me. It's the first of our five keys to effective writing and the one everyone expects, but keeping writing simple is a little more complicated than it may appear – just a little. Let's agree first that expressing what we need to say with fewer words is generally a virtue. It's easy to agree, but even experienced writers use unnecessary words.

Wordy

exact opposites
rather unique
when and if
specific example
in six months time
as far as we are concerned
despite the fact that
the volume of demand
the level of wages rose
do a study of the effects of

Simpler

opposites
unique
when (or if)
example
in six months
we believe
although
the demand
wages rose
study, research

My favourite is a sign reading, ‘Pedestrian Stairs’. It’s at the top of a parking building and presumably for all those who are thinking of taking their horse or motorbike down there. Mind you, ‘This door has been locked for security purposes’ was a leading contender.

Our aim is simplicity, not just fewer words.

Sometimes *more* words can make writing much simpler, because we are expressing ideas in a way the reader can understand. Take jargon. It’s a useful shorthand for people who understand it, but often baffling for those who don’t.

Our terms are f.o.b. to L.A.F.T.A. customers.

It might be intelligible to first-time exporters with more words.

Our terms for customers from the Latin America Free Trade Association member countries are for us to pay all costs of transport, loading charges and insurance to our ports. You would be responsible for all costs once the goods are on the ship.

We should feel comfortable using more words when it helps us explain ideas more simply to someone who doesn’t know the jargon.

If your reader happens to be an experienced exporter, the jargon in the first example is a better choice. You’ll save yourself some time, and the reader will appreciate the conciseness of your letter. You’ll be reader-focused because you’ll be communicating with her in the special language of exporting you both speak. The principle, keep it simple, remains.

Use simple words and ideas, even if you need more words.

Ask a vital question

Sometimes looking for words to take out won’t make much difference, but focusing on the reader will. Just stand back and ask yourself, ‘What does my reader really need to know?’

A city council sends out regular notices with this long-winded sentence at the top:

If you are not the owner of this property but are a tenant it would be appreciated if you would pass this leaflet on to the owner for their information.

A headline, *To the owner* would do it, because that’s all the reader needs to know.

Here's one from an insurance company...

As a result of the declaration on a recent claim form, it has come to our attention that you have been disqualified from driving due to a speeding conviction. The claim has been declined.

What does the reader need to know? He already knows that he filled in a claim form, told the insurance company that he had been convicted of speeding and disqualified from driving. He won't have forgotten any of that. He only needs to know the company's decision and the reason.

We have declined your claim because of your conviction for speeding.

Use a simpler construction

Let's note different kinds of sentence.

Simple sentences have only one subject, a verb and, usually, something you say about the subject.

I wrote the report.

I will send you an invitation.

The office will be closed.

Certainly they're simple, but you can imagine what strange robotic paragraphs you would create if that's all you used. 'It is Monday. We will meet in my office. I will chair the meeting. We will discuss the sales figures. We will decide our next action.'

Compound sentences are simple sentences joined to make a more natural and interesting rhythm.

Call me as soon as it arrives *and* I will ask someone to collect it.'

Thanks for the offer, *but* I will be out of town that day.

Many writers complicate their sentences with promises. They create sentences that say, ‘I’m going to tell you something important soon, but before I do, I want to tell you something else’. You know you are into one of those *Wait for it* sentences when they start with, ‘having, being, because, due to, given that’, or ‘owing to’.

Owing to the increasing number of applications we have been receiving since the decision was announced and also the shortage of staff, particularly during school holidays, when parents who cannot make alternative arrangements ask for time off to be with their children, there will be some delays in replying and it’s unlikely that we will meet our key performance indicators.

Did you read it all? Unless you are unusually dedicated, you’ll have skipped through it, or drifted off into what’s on the telly tonight or what the dog is doing at home. The key point comes at the end and it’s unrealistic to expect our readers to hang in for so long. If you discover that you’ve created a monstrosity like that, turn your sentence around. Give your reader the key point first. See if you can break it into two sentences.

Short wait-for-it sentences won’t do any harm.

Although it’s a holiday tomorrow, I’ll be coming to the office.

Having seen your portfolio, I’m convinced that you would be right for the job.

Delivering your key point second can be a useful way to provide some variety, but don’t keep your reader waiting for more than half a line.

Informal

Let’s get controversial.

If you were taught that there’s an approved formal way of writing for business, you were misled. Your boss or colleagues are wrong if they tell you that a business letter must contain such sentences and phrases as:

Enclosed please find...for your perusal.

I refer to your letter of February 24...

Your letter of April 3 refers and we confirm...

We are in receipt of your letter of November 13 and wish to advise that...

...assuring you of our best attention at all times...

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact the writer.

Imagine that you call a computer company and have a perfectly normal conversation with the sales rep. Then two days later you receive a letter beginning, 'With reference to our telephone conversation of August 7...'

We wouldn't finish a conversation by saying, 'If you have any questions please contact the speaker'. Why shouldn't we write, 'Please call me on my direct line if you have any questions', or something similarly informal?

What to tell people in the office

Most people write formally because teachers and bosses have told them that it's the 'proper' way to write. You need something to show they're wrong to think that such stuffy writing has official approval.

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Let's bring out the gurus of English usage.

If you want authoritative support on a point of English usage consult Henry Fowler's *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage*, first published in 1926. Fowler calls stuffy, formal, business writing *commercialese*. I think we can say that he doesn't approve:

'...much of it originated in a wish to treat the customer with almost obsequious respect. But it has become an artificial jargon.'

If you think that the others in your office will still say, 'Yes, but it's the way we were taught', quote this to them and tell them who wrote it – and when.

'We have no hesitation in reporting that Commercial English is not only objectionable to all those who have the purity of the language at heart but also contrary to the true interests of commercial life, sapping its vitality and encouraging the use of dry, meaningless formulae just where vigorous and arresting English is the chief requisite.' *The Departmental Committee on the Teaching of English in England (1921)*

So there's the opinion of a whole committee of gurus gathered together by the British Government to decide how English should be taught in the home of the English language. Who would have more authority to decide what is proper or approved in the teaching of English language? You could say that the idea of a separate formal language for business writing was officially condemned in 1921. It didn't stop many teachers and employers insisting on it, but they had no authority to do so.

Here's a complication. In some cultures, business people still expect formal language and would think you too casual if you didn't meet them at least part way. French and German business correspondence can be very formal. It's traditional to write formally in Asian cultures too, but many employees of Asian companies tell me they are now expected to write in a more conversational tone.

Don't try to impress them with the words you know

There's another reason many people write formally and it applies particularly to reports. They imagine that the communication is too important for plain speaking, so they use formal language in the vain hope that they and the message will have a special authority.

A Drama for Writers of Formal English

(Imagine a face-to-face conversation)

Customer

Yes, good morning. I've come about this account. I've paid it but you keep sending me reminders.

Manager

Please note that we will, of course, endeavour to take any remedial action that may be appropriate under the circumstances, but we wish to advise that there have been some delays recently due to administrative and processing issues which are currently being addressed.

Customer

Well...I wrote to you two months ago saying I had paid it but the reminders kept coming. Here's the letter.

Manager

I recall now that we were in receipt of your letter and wrote to you in response shortly after that date. (You no doubt found enclosed a complimentary copy of our catalogue for your perusal.)

Customer

Yes, but the letter said nothing. It didn't answer my complaint and the reminders kept coming.

Manager

It is disappointing that the action taken was not as per your request.

Regarding the matter of the resending of invoices, please be advised that action will shortly be taken to ensure that the same circumstances do not arise again. We wish to apologise for any inconvenience this may have caused you and trust that this action meets with your approval.

Customer

Okay, I'll give you a week, but if those reminders keep coming after that, I'll be back to see you – personally, and there'll be trouble. I'm not having my credit rating destroyed.

Manager

Indeed. May I suggest that should there be such a recurrence, you do not hesitate to contact the speaker – by telephone.

A study by Daniel Oppenheimer suggests that formal language is more likely to work against us. Oppenheimer asked readers to describe the writers of text from two samples. The readers decided that the writers of unnecessarily complex formal text were less convincing and less intelligent, not more. The title of his paper? ‘Consequences of erudite vernacular utilized irrespective of necessity: problems with using long words needlessly’. Impress your readers with the clarity of your thinking and explanations, not the words you know.

You can even write technical reports that engage your readers. Many people with technical skills have had no training in writing and lapse into the style they used at university. The result can make heavy reading, often, not because of the topic, but simply the language.

Here’s one that made the news:

The property unit has been through a supply chain optimisation process aimed at achieving operational effectiveness through the rationalisation of maintenance contracts.

What’s newsworthy about that? The newspaper reporter thought it was an amusing example of council gobbledegook. Oops.

Here’s one from a health board:

Demand-driven expenditure for the month continues the year-to-date trend of being lower than budget.

I think it means that both demand and expenses continue to be within our budget. Could you imagine saying it to your senior leadership team the way the staff member wrote it? Resist the temptation to add pompous, formal language you’d be embarrassed to use in a conversation with your reader.

See if you can manage without these words and phrases...

Due to, utilise, utilisation, in regard to, regarding, prior to, procure, obtain commencement, situated, perceived, tasked, desirable, therefore, it should be noted, it is noted, commonality, for the purposes of, with respect to, subsequently, in terms of

Laying it on the line – informally

Many people who like the idea of informality are sure it wouldn't apply to their business writing. Usually they have something to do with enforcing the law, or they need to be aware that their letters may end up in court as Exhibit A. It's important work and they can't risk any misinterpretation. It's usually not too difficult to persuade them that they can be more precise by writing more informally.

Here's the work of a council litter officer convinced that the court would expect a formal letter.

Dear Madam

ILLEGAL REFUSE

This officer has obtained a refuse bag illegally dumped in High Street. The bag contained an article that had been directed to yourself, indicating that you have been in possession of the article.

It is an offence to dump refuse in or on any public place, or in the case of private land, in or on that private land without the consent of its occupier.

Any person found to have committed an offence under the Litter Act 1979 can be liable for a fine up to \$750.00, or in the case of a body corporate \$5,000.00.

The refuse must be removed from its current location and disposed of at the landfill within four days from the date of this letter.

Yours faithfully

He's really letting her know that she has broken the law, but it's full of official-sounding formality – much of it irrelevant to the woman who dropped her rubbish bag.

Usually, official-sounding formality doesn't make our writing seem more important, just pompous and often complicated. Simple, appropriately informal language will help you more if it does go to court.

Here's a less formal, but still very firm, alternative.

Dear Mrs Jones

ILLEGAL REFUSE

Council staff have found a rubbish bag in High Street containing mail addressed to you. I must assume that it is yours.

It is an offence to dump rubbish in any public place and if we have to prosecute, you could be fined up to \$750.

The bag is near the fountain. Please remove it immediately.

Yours sincerely

This time we have called her Mrs Jones and we haven't quoted from the Litter Act 1979 or mentioned bodies corporate. We have still told her what we want her to do and what the consequences might be if she doesn't do it. If it goes to court, the judge will know that we have warned her in language most people could understand.

How informal should I be?

Make sure it's *appropriate* informality.

So what's appropriate?

Your words should be appropriate to the reader and your relationship. Now that you are a writer who focuses on the reader, you'll be thinking constantly about your readers and the degree of informality they would find expect. You do the same in conversation, without even thinking about it.

We should be writing as we would speak, but what we might say to our readers over a cappuccino is not the ultimate guide to appropriate informality. Business writing is for the record, even in an email. It should have polish, and usually that polish involves a little, just a little, more formality – but nowhere near stuffiness.

In business, the most appropriate informality is usually in a band between casual and stuffy. In a letter or email to a client you know well, you would contract words and choose more informal words and expressions. In a report to your board, you would contract words less often and use slightly more formal language. It's like getting dressed up for a wedding, to show that you're taking the occasion seriously.

Here's the way to decide what's appropriate informality...

Ask, 'What would I say to those readers – on that topic, in the context they would read it?'

Informality and speeches

Informality is essential for all speeches – except when you really are addressing the nation at a time of crisis.

As you write your speech or presentation, imagine yourself saying it to just two people, and *talk* to them. Be as informal as you would when talking to two people at work. They don't see themselves as a crowd, but as individuals.

Contract your words in the script. Don't rely on making the contractions as you speak. Make liberal (but not contrived) use of, *you're, we're, I've, they've, don't, haven't*. It's essential. Incidentally, be careful with the sound of your contractions. *They're not*, for instance, sounds much better than *they aren't*. It's also easier to hear the negative.

You can apply almost all the ideas in this book to speeches and presentations, whether you write them or not. Appropriate informality is a vital beginning.

Direct

We say we want people to tell us what they mean, but we don't always deliver directness ourselves. I once suggested to an accountant who wrote monthly reports for the board of a large company that he should say what he means.

Do you mean make a recommendation?'

Yes.

Isn't that a bit risky? The board might not like it.

Isn't that what they want you to do?

I suppose so, but I can do it more safely if I just describe the issues.

Yes, it could be safer to hide your meaning, but it's not effective writing. It's not good service either.

Some people say that it's not their job to recommend, only to advise, but they can still get to the point. Ask yourself, *what is my real point here?*

In writing, being direct means two things:

- being specific
- saying what you mean.

Being specific means adding the detail that makes our writing authoritative, interesting and useful. You might want to mention how many people came to the meeting, the number of people in the queue when you were kept waiting at the bank, or that Kate brought red carnations for the reception desk this morning and they came from her own garden. There's a limit of course. Filling our writing with detail that's not interesting or useful for the reader, breaks the golden rule and isn't simple.

Saying what you mean is a virtue, but let's acknowledge that it too has limits, and we'll come to them.

Watch out for signs!

Watch how people who write signs dress simple ideas up into something more formal and less direct. Take the signs on lifts. The usual one is:

'In event of fire do not use lifts'

I've found a few that put it this way:

'In case of fire do not use lifts'

Are they suggesting that it's too risky to use the lifts, that we could cause a fire by just getting into a lift?

A grand hotel took it to a new level:

'Do not use lifts in case of fire'

Now that's daft. Each signwriter probably intends to say, 'Don't use the lifts in a fire' or, 'Never use a lift in a fire!' or perhaps, 'If there is a fire, use the stairs'. It's as if they believe that direct language wouldn't convey the importance of their message, yet their indirectness seems stuffy and hides the meaning. Direct language might save more lives.

You will see indirect language in business writing everywhere. Often, focusing on the reader's interests would allow the writer to bring out the real meaning. Take this extract from a brochure for a company of consultant engineers:

All design work is undertaken as a team at a single location, hence leading to an efficient flow of information, a high degree of innovation and mutual problem solving and a minimum wastage of human resource.

Why should we care? It's not focused on our interests, and it's not direct. We expect a brochure to tell us what the company can do for us. Why did they hide their meaning? Perhaps they really meant:

We can solve your engineering problems very efficiently. Our designers all work in the same office, so we're able to exchange information and ideas easily.

It may take more courage, but you can be more economical, authoritative and persuasive if you say what you mean.

How direct should I be?

Directness is like honesty. Yes, certainly a good idea, but instinctively we know to tread warily when the question is, say, 'Do my hips look big in this?'

We need to think about appropriate directness.

Here's an extract from a letter to one of my company's clients from a website designer who was hoping to pick up some new business. How would you react?

Dear Sir/Madam

WEBSITE DESIGN

Your website falls far short of what is expected of your company.

It is visually bland and boring and feels quite templated.

The content is great, but the presentation is slack.

He wasn't leaving any doubt. Let's assume that he was saying what he meant, but he might have been more successful in his marketing with something more appropriately direct. (Our client told us that he agreed that their website was bland and boring and they planned to improve it – but not with him.) A less in-your-face directness would have worked better. Say:

I've been looking through your website. The content is already great and I've come up with some exciting ways of developing the visual appeal.

Opposite my office was a little cake shop dealing with a more sensitive issue. The staff came up with this tactful notice for the display of cakes...

'Please ask our friendly staff if you would like to purchase a cake. We will happily remove it from the cooler for you.'

Our website designer might have preferred, 'Keep your dirty hands out of here!'

The cake shop chose an indirect, but diplomatic message, but as the exasperated manager told me, it didn't stop some people putting their hands in to take out a cake.

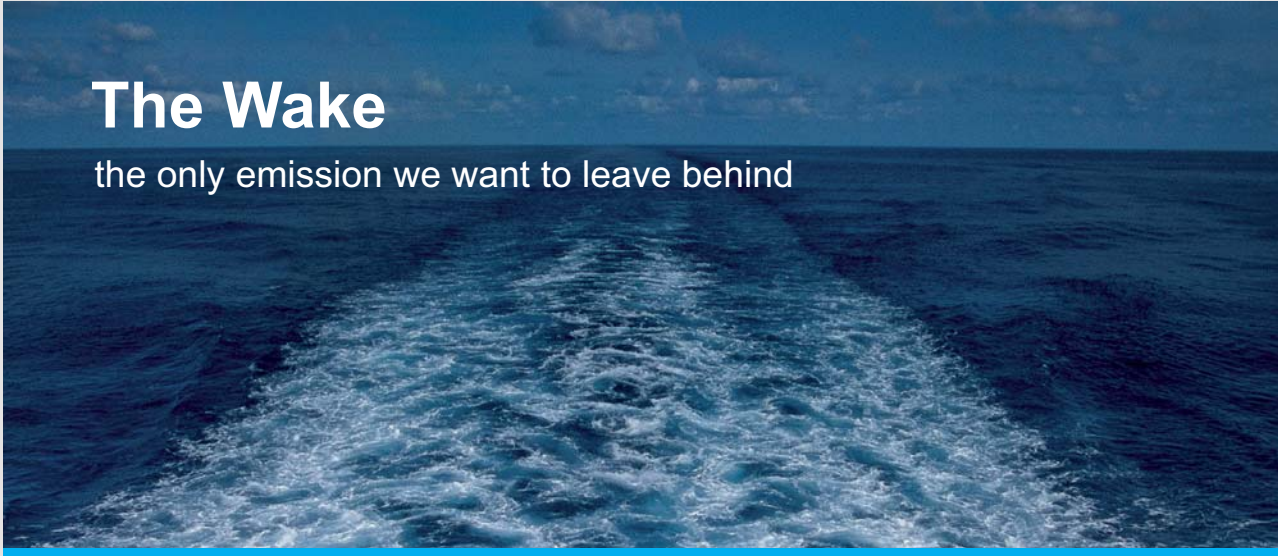
So here's the challenge: to choose the level of directness that conveys the message, maybe even firmly, but without giving offence or encouraging resentment. Your social skills are just as relevant in writing, whether it's an email, a report or a sign.

Don't leave questions

Some common expressions in English obscure our message. Many writers use them without thought and can't see why their readers would be left wondering.

| | |
|---|--|
| Your application will be subject to some delay. | How much delay – a few days, a year? |
| We have designed a number of similar buildings. | What number – two, five hundred? |
| We received numerous claims from the flooding. | Numerous? Is that 15, 60, 125? |
| It will have a detrimental effect on our sales. | How detrimental? Will we be slightly below our sales targets this month? Will it put us out of business? |

Sometimes we can't be as direct as we would like because we don't know, the situation is evolving, or it's not useful for the reader. You might have to settle for 'several', or '*at least 320*' or 'significant', but don't leave your reader mystified.



The Wake


the only emission we want to leave behind

Low-speed Engines Medium-speed Engines Turbochargers Propellers Propulsion Packages PrimeServ

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Tell them early

Imagine you are being sued for a million dollars. You've had two weeks of court hearings and waited six weeks for the judge's written decision. It's now in front of you – 100 pages of carefully-worded legal reasoning. You know that the judge's decision is on page 100. Could you start at page 1 and read through to 100, or would you want to peek? Of course you would. You would have to know, and it's very unlikely that you could even take in the reasoning without knowing where it's heading.

It's the same with emails and reports. In emails, you will probably want to say something polite first – perhaps, 'Thank you for calling us last week' or 'Thanks for your enquiry'. Then, get to the point.

In reports, tell your readers your recommendation at the beginning, then explain your reasoning. If you put your recommendations at the end, they'll look down anyway. Many report writers tell me they've been told to put recommendations at the end because it shows they've thought the issues through before deciding on their recommendation. Surely, our readers will expect us to have thought about both the issues and the recommendations *before* we start writing.

You can make your paragraphs more direct by following an easy format...

State and expand

Make your key point in your first sentence, then expand – tell your readers why you said that, or tell them more about it. If it's a new topic, create a new paragraph, decide your key point and make that first.

It's direct and a great service to your readers. Ideally, a reader should be able to summarise your letter, email or report by reading the first sentences of your paragraphs. It's also easier for you to write paragraphs that have a clear main point followed by an explanation.

It doesn't work for every paragraph. You may use single-sentence paragraphs from time-to-time, especially in emails. In a speech, you may decide that it's better to tease your audience a little and make your main point a final flourish. Use *state and expand*, unless there's a good reason not to.



Active

Why does this famous extract from Britain's war-time prime minister work so well?

We shall fight on the beaches.
 We shall fight on the landing grounds.
 We shall fight in the fields and in the streets.
 We shall fight in the hills.
 We shall never surrender. *Sir Winston Churchill*

The whole speech succeeds for many reasons, including the repetition, the rhythm and the word *shall* which indicates determination. But our real interest here is in *active* language or active voice, as it is usually called.

Active language tells you who is responsible for the action. If you are in any doubt about what I mean by active ask yourself: Is there any doubt who will be fighting on the beaches or on the landing grounds? The active voice gives your writing authority, adds interest and it's more appealing to read or hear.

I doubt that the British people would have been as inspired by the passive form:

The beaches shall be fought on.
 The landing grounds shall be fought on.
 There shall be fighting in the fields and in the streets...

Here's a simple formula for active sentences...

Active = Actor + Verb (in that order)

The passive form doesn't tell your reader who or what is involved in the action. My local supermarket displayed a small sign next to the glassware...

'All breakages will be paid for'.

Were they being kind in offering to pay? There's no actor in those words, so the statement is passive. The active voice would have made their more likely meaning clear.

‘You must pay for any breakages.’

‘If you break it, you must pay.’

‘We will ask you to pay for anything you break.’

In those examples ‘you’ makes the responsibility clear.

Actors such as I and we ensure that we take responsibility for our actions, recommendations and decisions, but many writers use the passive voice to hide from ownership or responsibility.

‘Many mistakes were made.’ There’s no actor, so it’s passive.

An actor makes you think of a person, but keep in mind that you can create active sentences if the actor is, say, an organisation, a report or a dog, as long as there is an action and it’s clear who, or what, did it.

‘The path led to the best view of the mountain’

The path was leading. That’s acting, so the path is an actor.

‘Graph 2.1 summarises the results.’

The graph is summarising. That’s acting, so Graph 2.1 is an actor

‘This report outlines the risks.’

The report is outlining. That’s acting, so the report is an actor.

Note that the actor comes first. ‘The report was read by Jane’, has both an actor plus a verb, but, ‘Jane read the report’ puts them in the right order. Doesn’t it sound stronger too?

Don’t be distracted by the form of the verb. *We fight*, *we shall not fight*, and *we fought*, qualify as much as Churchill’s, ‘We shall fight...’

A Driving Lesson

Can you identify active and passive in this dialogue?

Driver

That was close!

Instructor

It should be noted that the vehicle is required to be driven well clear of the centre line.

Driver

Fair enough, but I only strayed for a moment and nothing was actually hit. How am I going – overall?

Instructor

Your excessive speed, constant tooting of the horn, regular gestures at other drivers and weaving through traffic have caused some anxiety. But there are some good points to note.

Driver

So I'm improving – I'm going to pass the test?

Instructor

That may be a little ambitious at this stage, but obviously, driving confidence is not a significant problem.

Driver

So it's possible? It's always been my dream to have a real driver's licence.

Instructor

The red light should be noted and the brakes applied at this point.

Driver

I'll do better on the next one...Hey, that driver was lucky not to hit us! Do you think I should stop him and let him know to be more careful next time?

Instructor

Perhaps he thought he had the right of way. Most people do when they see a green light... Just a thought, but is the Ace Driving School familiar to you?

Driver

Sure. I took one of their instructors out for a ride last week. They were telling me how good you are. I don't think they believed in me as much as you do.

The active voice is not just some minor academic point of English usage. The difference is dramatic. Yet most business writers use the passive voice more often.

Can you identify the active and passive sentences in these pairs? Which do you prefer? The best test is to read them aloud.

A

Monitoring of our customers' satisfaction was carried out by the sales staff.

A financial reporting system has been set up.

A direct debit form has been included.

B

The sales staff monitored our customers' satisfaction.

The company has set up a financial reporting system.

I have included a direct debit form.

Did you prefer the sentences in column B? They are the active sentences. If you preferred one or two in column A, just be sure that you recognise them as passive.

Technical writing

Most people who write technical reports love passive language. It's time to change. Even scientific journals are now asking for the active voice.

A scientist friend of mine is passionate about the passive voice and we've been debating the issue for months. It's the way he was taught at university and he believes that passive language displays his objectivity by taking the researcher out of the research. Surely, writing, 'We prepared agar dishes to produce a homogenous culture', doesn't compromise the credibility of your method. It's not a value judgement.

If you really can't bear the idea of human actors, try working up to it with non-human ones.

The data reveals a strong correlation...

The report showed...

The histogram records the intensity of light...

Does it really matter if you continue to use passive language? Yes. It won't engage your reader as well as the active voice. It's indirect (because you are not saying who is involved) and it will lead you into clumsy sentences.

Many of the universities are moving away from passive. Some of the world's top science and technology faculties are advising their students to change.

Stanford University

Expunge virtually all use of the passive voice.

Martin Fischer and John Kunz writing for engineering students.

MIT

For reasons I do not understand, writers like to write passive sentences. *Professor David Custer 'Science and Engineering Writing'*

University of New South Wales

Using active voice in your writing creates a direct and concise message. *Advice to students 'Technical Writing – Features and Conventions'*

University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology

My aim is not to condemn all use of passive constructions. It is to stress the pernicious effect of using passive constructions as the rule rather than as the exception. To do so is virtually to guarantee that a paper will become ponderously roundabout, abstract and heavy to read. *J Kirkman Department of English*

Select vigorous verbs

Some writers work hard to find colourful or clever-sounding adjectives to give their sentences more impact, but the real power in writing comes from verbs. Go for stronger verbs so that you can make even better use of the active voice. Strong verbs build more dramatic pictures,

Some verbs are especially strong.

We shall *fight* on the beaches.

She *demanded* an apology.

We *dispute* your claim.

The court has *dismissed* your appeal.

Weak verbs

We *obtained* a report.

The board *considered* your submission.

Stronger verbs

We *commissioned* a report.

The board *debated/discussed* your submission.

Sometimes verbs are so weak that nouns take over the sentence. Weak verbs and strong nouns can make a report eye-wateringly dull.

Starring boring nouns (Notice the weak verbs)

Nicole and Pete *had* a meeting on Friday.

The company *gave consideration* to your proposal.

The committee made a *recommendation* that we spend all the money in the budget.

The scientists will conduct an *analysis* of the data.

Starring vigorous verbs

Nicole and Peter *met* on Friday.

The company *considered* your proposal.

The committee *recommended* that we spend all the money in the budget.

The scientists will *analyse* the data.

There is a place for passive language.

Use it when you don't want to allocate blame or responsibility. In your business you might want to write a memo calling attention to the fact that someone used the office car this morning without going through the reservation system. Others have done it before and you don't want it to happen again. You might decide that it's more constructive not to allocate blame, so you have a choice.

You could use an active sentence with an anonymous actor as in 'Someone used the car this morning without booking it first'. It sounds ominous, as if you will be tracking the offender down before long, but it does rivet attention by being active.

The passive alternative would be, 'The car was used this morning without being booked first'. Not gripping, but the emphasis is now on the offence rather than the offender.

Occasionally, you will use a passive sentence for variety or to soften a sentence that might otherwise sound harsh or aggressive.

Sometimes passive is more appropriate because the event is more important than the actor. For example, 'The President has been shot' works better than, 'An unknown assailant has shot the President'.

Be comfortable with the passive voice. Don't hesitate to use it when there's a good reason. It's the proportion that counts. One of our client organisations is happy with up to 20 per cent passive and that proportion seems to work well for them.



Personal

Ever thought that your writing might be a little dry? Here's the cure.

In our method, *personal* means adding humans or things associated with humans, whenever it's appropriate. In business, think of it as simply the opposite of impersonal, rather than your quirky personal style.

There are degrees of personalness. (Okay, there isn't a word personalness, but we need one.) *You* is our most personal word and the marketing research shows what a powerful motivator it is. It also forces us to focus on the reader.

Less personal, but still very useful, are things associated with the reader: 'your account', 'your house'. Then there are other people, Mary-Jane, I, we, the engineer, the committee, the residents of Byron Street. As we move down the line to impersonal writing, we have things that make us think of the people who work or live there: Ministry of Economic Development, McDonalds, the police. Then there are things with no particular association with people.

Adding the human element is a very powerful technique, yet most writers strive to keep people out of their writing. Why? They are missing the opportunity to involve their readers or audiences, and it makes a very big difference.

Here's an extract from a community newsletter:

It is expected that a summary of the submissions on the city plan will be available at the beginning of May. The summary will be able to be inspected at the main office or the Council's website.

Did you notice: 'It is expected...' and, 'The summary will be able to be inspected...'? Dull stuff. Someone has worked hard to keep the people out of that one. Let's put them in and focus on the reader.

We expect to have a summary of the submissions on the city plan ready by the beginning of May. You will be able to inspect it at the main office, or our website.

We, you, your. Was it easier to read? Notice that in getting personal we also made it more informal and direct.

Here's a notice from a service station:

Alcohol is not permitted to be brought on to these premises.

Wouldn't it be more effective to say, 'You must not bring alcohol on to these premises' or 'Do not bring alcohol on to these premises'? (The second one implies you. It's my preference.)

An engineer didn't want any humans in his report, so he created a special kind of van:

'A parked van failed to apply its handbrake and rolled downhill, hitting a fence.'

An airport didn't want people parking near a gate, so its sign included

'All vehicles will be fined.'

Many writers seem to assume that adding people makes the writing light and fluffy. It's as if they need to tell their audience, 'This is an important subject from an important organisation'. Too important for people? If the subject is important, it's only because of its relevance to people. If their organisations are important, it's only because of what they do for people.

Effective writers believe with a passion that it's the human element that makes writing important. It doesn't lower an organisation's status, it enhances it. By getting personal, you will show that you and your organisation are good to deal with.

Most people find that words such as *you, I, we, your, and our* make writing easier to read, more precise, more interesting, warmer and more memorable. You can take most dull letters, reports, memos and speeches and transform them by getting personal.

My favourite example of impersonal writing comes from a newsletter published by a government department:

Meetings and submissions have identified some issues that are considered not to have been given sufficient emphasis in the strategy.

Ways of getting personal

First, get oriented. Think about your readers or audience. Never let them out of your mind. Write for them. Help them to understand. Show them what's significant, interesting and relevant. Don't just give them the facts, show them why those facts are relevant to them. You can do that without making your writing seem like an extract from a marketing letter.

If the facts are not directly relevant to your reader, explain their relevance to other people. Virtually everything you will write about has some human relevance or purpose. Make the link and you will motivate your readers to read and remember.

Start your paragraphs with a personal element, especially the word *you*. If you are editing, starting with *you* or *we* will almost always unravel a complex first draft. Watch though for predictability. If you start every paragraph with *you* or *I*, you'll lose your reader quickly. Occasionally, for variety, you might want to add an impersonal sentence, but avoid those standard, lofty, impersonal phrases: 'It can be seen that... It will be appreciated that... It is expected that...' Banish them.

Make sure that you really are getting personal. It is usually not enough to refer to people in categories. How do you react to: 'We offer *you, our valued customer*, a chance to win a free trip to Paradise Island'? It certainly makes it clear that it's a form letter. A more personal alternative would be, '*We value the business you've given us* over the years so we're offering you a chance to win a free trip to Paradise Island.' 'The library is open to the *general public* between 9am and 8pm', sounds as if even the riff-raff will be allowed in at certain hours. We wonder what it has to do with us.

SMS from your computer

...Sync'd with your Android phone & number

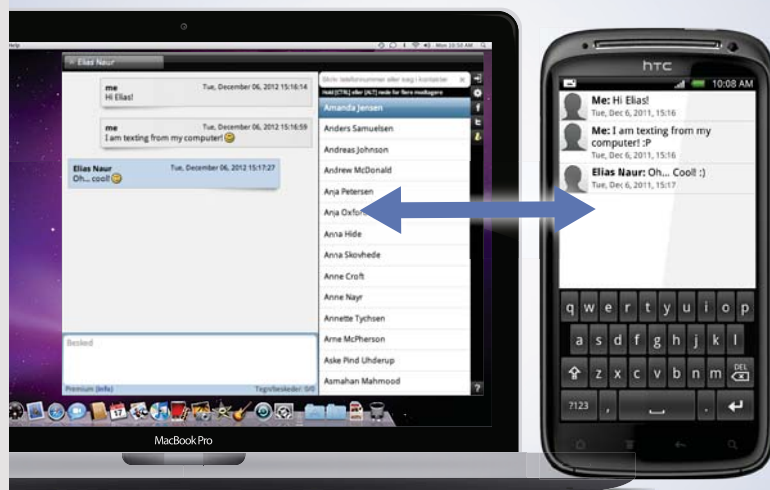
FREE
30 days trial!

Go to

BrowserTexting.com

and start texting from
your computer!

 BrowserTexting



Name-drop. Be a gossip. Wouldn't it be more interesting to say that Ann wrote the report, that it was Peter's holiday in France that left us short-handed this month, that Kylie and Jim repaired the pipe in the middle of the night and that it was Mrs Elsie James in Fresco Terrace who wrote the letter saying they were a couple of heroes?

Which of these alternatives is more personal? Which do you prefer?

| A | B |
|---|--|
| 1 It will be appreciated that four persons would not be enough for a staff party. | Clearly, four of us would not be enough for a staff party. |
| 2 Our engineer has checked it and believes that the site would be dangerous in a strong earthquake. | Investigations have shown that the site would be dangerous in a strong earthquake. |
| 3 It is believed that the new wedding management service will begin advertising by the end of the month. | We believe that Sara Jones will begin advertising her new wedding management service by the end of the month. |
| 4 You sent us more than we need to license your three dogs. | The envelope contained more than necessary to license three dogs. |
| 5 The project is programmed to begin in two months. Further information is available from this company's head office. | We will begin the project in two months. If you need more information please contact Janet at our head office. |

The more personal sentences are 1B, 2A, 3B, 4A, 5B. Easy wasn't it?

I promised that the five keys to effective writing would be simple to use, and even better, that they would overlap. I said that if you use one, you'll find that you're using at least one other because they're natural companions.

There is no more natural companion to any of the other four than our final key: *personal*. Getting personal means including people, especially your reader or audience. When you get personal, your writing usually becomes active and more informal and direct. It may or may not be simpler.

You might be thinking that active and personal are the same, so we only need four keys to effective writing. Unfortunately, it's not as easy as that. When you use people as actors and put them before the verb as in, 'Peter wrote the report' your sentence is both active and personal. If you switch the order, 'The report was written by Peter', it's personal, but not active. If you say, 'The report revealed important accounting errors', you have created an active, but impersonal sentence.

Personal and report writing

If your reports are primarily about things rather than people, you will have fewer opportunities to get personal. But don't dismiss personal. You might be surprised how often you can add a human element and make your writing easier to read, absorb and remember. Many scientists and engineers miss that opportunity. Most technical writing is unnecessarily impersonal.

An investigation needs to be completed into the causes of the seepage.

Does, 'An investigation needs to be completed...' seem strange to you? It's a thing. It doesn't need anything. Even, 'An investigation should be completed,' misses the opportunity to engage our reader. Let's use our fifth key to effective writing – personal:

We need to investigate the causes of the seepage.

What about this one?

The site will continue to be monitored.

Let's get personal:

We will continue to monitor the site.

This writer had been taught that humans don't belong in technical reports:

The current project is having a risk assessment prepared. A similar assessment might be needed to be completed for the next one.

It's not only impersonal, but indirect and clumsy. What about this?

We are preparing a risk assessment for the current project. You may need a similar assessment for the next one.

There are limits on how personal you can get in technical reports. It depends on the content and the culture of the organisation you are writing for. In many technical reports 'I' is inappropriate. Use 'we' or, if you really have to, the name of your organisation. There are times when 'You' isn't appropriate. If, for instance, you are writing to a committee, you might have to settle for 'since the committee commissioned us to...' It's still personal because 'the committee' creates a picture of the people who did the commissioning.

Sometimes in technical reports, people are irrelevant and it would seem contrived to add them.

There is a scoria quarry four kilometres from the site.

And:

The supernatant from the clarifier is the effluent from the plant. It is passed through UV disinfection equipment to reduce the faecal coliform count.

Those sentences are impersonal, and let's keep them that way.

When you are listing instructions you will probably choose to leave out the personal words, but they are implied.

'Start the motor before releasing the brake.'

'Before opening, stand the tin in boiling water for 10 minutes.'

Unless there's a good reason not to, get personal.

4 USING THE KEYS

Let's put the five keys to effective writing to work in a range of everyday business writing.

Over the next few pages, you'll see examples. Don't be distracted by the subject matter. They show different ways of thinking about business writing. Concentrate on the differences in style.

We tend to be more comfortable with appropriate informality in emails, so we'll use letters in the examples to highlight the contrast between the old way and modern professional writing.

Read them aloud. (Go on. Your colleagues will get used to it.)

Ask yourself, which is more precise, makes you want to read on, or builds relationships and gives better service?



Dear Mr Jones

PRODUCT DELIVERY

With reference to your letter of March 2, we thank you for drawing our attention to the delivery time.

We apologise for any inconvenience and in recompense, offer a gift voucher equivalent to the value of the articles concerned.

Yours faithfully

MP Smith

M P Smith
CUSTOMER SERVICES MANAGER

How would you feel about the reply and the company that sent it?

Notice the formality and the detached, impersonal style. Mr Smith misses an opportunity to win back Mr Jones's support. He uses formal language and doesn't even mention the product that arrived late. It's indirect and gives Mr Jones the impression that this is just another formula letter.

Let's take a different approach:

Using SIDAP



Informal, personal

Simple, direct

Personal, direct

Personal, active

Personal, informal

Informal

Informal (He's provided his first name.)

Dear Mr Jones

SLOW DELIVERY OF PRODUCT

Thank you for taking the trouble to write to me about the slow delivery.

I agree. It should not take five days to deliver a pair of gate hinges.

We are sorry for the inconvenience it caused you. It was well below our usual standard and we are finding ways to ensure it doesn't happen again.

I hope you will accept the gift voucher as some compensation, and that you will use it soon so that you can experience our (usually) excellent service.

Please contact me if you ever have any concerns about our delivery in future.

Sincerely

MP Smith

Michael Smith
CUSTOMER SERVICES MANAGER

Letter to a potential client

Dear Mrs Jones

CATERING FOR OFFICE PARTY

With reference to your response dated March 3 to our advertisement in The Tabloid on February 25, please find enclosed a copy of our brochure for your perusal.

This company has been in business since 1980 and has a proud tradition of service. This service has been complimented by businesses of all sizes during this time.

We appreciate your interest in our services and take this opportunity to assure you of our best attention at all times, should you wish to proceed.

Thank you for your reply.

Yours sincerely
BUBBLES CATERING LIMITED

PJ Smith

P. J. Smith
SALES MANAGER

This first draft is cold and stilted. It's a string of formal clichés.

Using SIDAP

Simple, informal,
direct, personal

Informal, personal,
direct (specific)

Personal, direct
(Says what we can
do for them)

Personal, simple

Informal

Informal

Dear Mrs Jones

CATERING FOR YOUR OFFICE PARTY

Thank you for replying to our advertisement in The Tabloid.

Pages 15 to 20 of the brochure have suggestions for office parties and some of the ways we could help. You'll find the price list on pages 21 and 22.

Think of us as the people who can take the worry and stress out of organising an office party.

I would be delighted to hear more about your plans and offer some suggestions.

Sincerely
BUBBLES CATERING LIMITED

PJ Smith

Peter Smith
MANAGING DIRECTOR

Reply to an unsolicited letter from a job seeker

Dear Mr Jones

EMPLOYMENT ENQUIRY

We acknowledge receipt of your letter with enclosures and your request for an appointment to discuss employment.

We are, however, not in a position to offer you a vacancy at the present time.

Vacancies do arise on occasion and we would like to keep your documents on file. If you have any objection to this course of action please contact the writer.

Sincerely

GLOBAL TRADE LIMITED

TM Smith

T. M. Smith

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER

Would you still want to work for them? You could think this firm is led by a cold fish, but it's just as likely that he's a warm-hearted softy who just needs to make use of the five keys to effective writing.

Using SIDAP

Simple, informal,
direct (specific)

Informal, personal,
active

Simple, active

Informal

Dear Peter

EMPLOYMENT ENQUIRY

Thank you for your letter asking about vacancies in our sales team.

At the moment we have all the sales staff we need, but I was interested in your experience and will certainly let you know when we are ready to advertise another vacancy.

I would like to keep the copy of your c.v. in the meantime, but please let me know if you want me to return it.

Sincerely

GLOBAL TRADE LIMITED

Terry Smith

Terry Smith

HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER

Letter to the building owner

Dear Sir

LEVEL 4 TOWER BUILDING

Further to our telephone conversation of July 24, we advise that we have now perused the lease document to determine which party is responsible for repairs to the electrical water heating system.

Pursuant to clause 8 in the First Schedule and clause 10.1 (a), it would appear that the responsibility does in fact lie with the occupiers of the building.

We therefore accept responsibility and will pay the account submitted by Ajax Plumbing Limited in due course and wish to extend our appreciation for your courtesy in this matter.

Yours

JM Smith

J. M. Smith
OFFICE MANAGER

Using SIDAP



Informal, simple

Personal, active,
direct

Simple, active

Informal, personal

Informal

Dear James

LEVEL 4 TOWER BUILDING

Thanks for the discussion about who pays for the repairs to the water heater.

I have checked through the lease and you were right. It does put the responsibility on us.

We will pay the bill from Ajax Plumbing.

Thanks for handling our misunderstanding so amicably.

Sincerely

Janet Smith

Janet Smith
OFFICE MANAGER

Letter of exasperation

Dear Sir

INVOICE: 4715

This company rejects claims in your recent letter with regard to the above invoice and urges further consideration by your company of recent correspondence on this matter.

Perusal of those documents will reveal that we are not in debit to your company and that on the contrary, our account has been in zero balance since the goods in question were supplied and returned as unsuitable, a credit note having been obtained.

We have since sought other suppliers with a standard of service more commensurate with our needs.

Thus, we see no value in entering into further correspondence with you and urge you indeed to take what legal remedies you may believe are open to you.

Yours faithfully
LIGHTNING SERVICES

S.J. Henderson

S.J. Henderson
OPERATIONS MANAGER

Perhaps this writer believes that pompous language will make his letter sound tough. But the *addressing-the-nation* formality does little more than make him seem aloof, even hostile. Being specific and *saying what you mean* (the two ways of being direct) would have helped him present his argument more effectively.

Using SIDAP

Simple, active

Simple, active

Personal

Active, direct,
personalActive, direct,
personalActive, direct,
personalSimple, active,
direct, personalSimple, active,
direct, personalSimple, active,
direct.Direct (says what
she means)

Informal

Dear Mr Ford

INVOICE: 4715

We have received your letter advising that unless we pay your account for \$1,240.31 you will take legal action.

We returned your insulators months ago.

I need to summarise the frustrating series of events leading to your letter.

March 3 You sent us the insulators and an invoice. We called your Service Manager, Jenny Williams, to say that they were damaged and we were sending them back.

March 11 As arranged, Jenny sent a credit note for the full amount and a letter of apology.

May 16 We received an account for overdue payment, rang John Smith and he apologised.

June 14 Another account arrived. I rang John. He said he would take action immediately.

July 20 Your company sent a reminder. We ignored it.

August 5 You sent your 'final reminder'.

It seems that your system failed because no-one followed through. Please correct your records.

Yours sincerely

LIGHTNING SERVICES

S.J. Henderson

5 A SIMPLE EDITING SYSTEM

The golden rule and the five keys to effective writing can give you a new focus in your editing. Instead of cutting and pasting and changing words until somehow the text seems a little better, ask yourself constantly, ‘Could it be more reader-focused, simpler, more (appropriately) informal, direct, active or personal?’

Prescribe cures

We can make the process even more efficient.

Let’s take a poorly-written draft from a previous example and edit it using the five keys. The letters represent the keys, so we are prescribing a cure, not noting what’s wrong. *I* means, ‘It could be more informal. *A* means ‘It could be active’, *P* means ‘It could be more personal’.

Notice too, that I haven’t corrected the draft. You won’t need to either because you already know how to make writing simpler, more informal, direct, active and personal. Don’t slow the process down by making changes on paper, just do that as you retype.

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#ACHIEVEMORE

TomTom 

Sometimes you can think of more than one way to prescribe a cure in the same line. In this example, the first two lines could be more personal, direct and informal, so I have used the symbols P/D/I.

Suggested editing marks

| | |
|-------|--|
| SIDAP | This company rejects claims in your recent correspondence with regard to the above invoice and urges further consideration by your company of recent correspondence on this matter. |
| P/D/I | |
| A | |
| D/I | |
| I | Perusal of those documents will reveal that we are not in debit to your company and that on the contrary, our account has been in zero balance since the goods in question were supplied and returned as unsuitable, a credit note having been obtained. |
| D/A | |
| I/A | |
| I/D | We have since sought other suppliers with a standard of service more commensurate with our needs. |
| I | Thus, we see no value in entering into further correspondence with you and urge you indeed to take what legal remedies you may believe are open to you. |

Don't worry if you didn't spot all the flaws in the draft or that you have a slightly different interpretation of what is wrong. It doesn't matter. Ironically, the imprecise nature of this editing system is what makes it so efficient. That's because the keys overlap. So making a sentence more personal will usually make it active, more direct (because you are saying who is involved) and more informal. Making a sentence simpler will often also make it more direct.

Effective writing is a frame of mind. Just prescribing one key in a paragraph may be enough to get you back into writing in a style much closer to a business conversation with the reader. You may find that you are not just changing words, but whole sentences or paragraphs and that the words are flowing naturally.

6 ORGANISE YOUR REPORT OR PRESENTATION

Here's an easy way to assemble your facts, evidence and arguments in a logical order, so that both you and your reader always know how everything fits together.

Let's use an analogy. Try thinking of the contents of your report or presentation as a city your reader doesn't know. We can use the analogy of a city to consider three levels of information.

1. Provide an introduction by describing what kind of city it is, especially the reason for its existence. With a report or presentation that means you'll be stating its subject, or preferably, its purpose. (It depends on the context, purpose doesn't always work.)
2. Think of the suburbs within the city. They give more detail about the nature of the city and why it exists. The suburbs of your report or presentation are the main topics.
3. Think of the streets. They are the details contained in each of the suburbs.

Imagine that you only have a few disjointed ideas about what to put into a report and no idea how to organise them. The city analogy will help you brainstorm and organise your thoughts into a logical structure. You should be able to do most of it in ten minutes.

Sceptical? Try it. All you'll need are, say, 30 slips of paper, about 10 centimetres by 5 (or small *Post-its*) and a coloured pen.

On each slip write a note about any idea that might be useful in your report. Write as fast as you can, with just one idea per slip. Don't worry whether an idea might make a suburb or a street, just keep those ideas coming. A word or two should be enough to remind you later. Think of facts, arguments, objections you could pre-empt, quotes, evidence and even anecdotes that might be relevant.

Use the city analogy to organise your report or presentation



With the city analogy, we restrict ourselves to three levels of information (city, suburb and street) if possible. Use slips of paper to arrange the ideas into a logical order. If an issue provides an introduction to others, think horizontally and put it first, rather than create a new vertical level.

When you have run dry, start organising the streets into suburbs. Which ideas go together? Arrange them in columns. Are there any gaps you could fill now or with some research? Note them on the remaining slips and slide them into place.

Give each column a heading and use the coloured pen to separate it from the streets.

Give your report a city view with a brief statement about its purpose.

We limit our report to three levels of information: city, suburbs and streets. We would only add another if there's a compelling reason. We can have any number of suburbs, but if we allow ourselves the same number of freedom with levels of information (the vertical axis) we will create a complex structure very quickly. It would be difficult for us to manage and would confuse our readers. If an issue provides an introduction to others, think horizontally and put it first, rather than create a new vertical level.

Now here's the real beauty of the system. Once you have the slips in place, you can move them around. You might decide, for instance, that an idea would be easier to explain if you dealt with it under another heading, so you just move it into the suburb you want. You might want to change the order of the suburbs. It's easy and you never lose sight of the details.

The city analogy allows you to keep track of how the various elements of your report or presentation relate to each other. You move the slips around until you have the most logical structure. You'll probably find that creating suburbs and thinking about the streets makes you think of other streets or suburbs you could add.

Here's one way to structure a standard report. Think of each topic as a suburb.

- Introduction
- Summary
- The methods you used
- The results of your investigation
- Your conclusions or recommendations

Topics vary so much that it's usually best to develop an in-house style for suburbs, rather than try to stretch a format that's not appropriate. You'll need to base them on what's most useful for your readers.

Write a covering letter stating the purpose of the report, reminding your readers why they asked for it and acknowledging any contributions others have made.

7 SAMPLE LETTERS AND EMAILS

Bills – theirs and yours

Courtesy and directness will usually be enough. As always, use simple, informal, direct, active and personal language to make it easy for your late payer to read, absorb and remember your request, and your evidence.

Late payers may be frustrating, but you'll get your money faster if you resist temptation. Consider the power balance alone. They have your money and if they refuse to pay, you will have the inconvenience and expense of taking them to court to get it. Cold, impersonal letters, demands, or an aggressive tone, just encourage many people to hold out a little longer.

Probably more important, they may pay, but go elsewhere next time. Is it worth the short term pleasure of expressing your frustration over, say, a couple of hundred dollars when in the next five years the same customer might pay you a couple of thousand dollars in repeat business?



Brain power

By 2020, wind could provide one-tenth of our planet's electricity needs. Already today, SKF's innovative know-how is crucial to running a large proportion of the world's wind turbines.

Up to 25 % of the generating costs relate to maintenance. These can be reduced dramatically thanks to our systems for on-line condition monitoring and automatic lubrication. We help make it more economical to create cleaner, cheaper energy out of thin air.

By sharing our experience, expertise, and creativity, industries can boost performance beyond expectations. Therefore we need the best employees who can meet this challenge!

The Power of Knowledge Engineering

Plug into The Power of Knowledge Engineering.
Visit us at www.skf.com/knowledge

SKF

'Please pay it now.'

Make the first contact light and assume that the failure to pay is simply an administrative hiccup. You should always give the details the accounts staff will need to track the invoice down. Contact a person, not just a department. Make your letter or email personal too, and go back to the same person each time. Let's say you begin with an email.



Subject: Overdue account

Hello Paul

I need your help.

Somewhere in your department one of our accounts has been waiting for payment for more than a month. Could you rescue it?

Aardvark and Company is one of our most valued customers and you have always paid our accounts promptly in the past. I would appreciate your paying this one as soon as possible.

The invoice date is February 27. The number is 574671 and the amount \$2,945.63.

Thank you.

Larry Smith

'Pay up – please!'

Maintain your courtesy and directness. The words 'I plan to call you at the end of this week...' will encourage your reader to take a personal interest. For a follow-up, use a letter to give it a more formal look. The language, of course, will still be within the appropriately informal range.



Dear Paul

OVERDUE ACCOUNT

I need your cooperation on an overdue account.

Do you remember that I sent you an email on May 1 about our account for \$2,945.63? It is now almost two months overdue and we have not seen a payment or heard from you.

The invoice date is February 27. The number is 574671.

I plan to call you at the end of this week, but I would appreciate a payment before then.

Thank you.

Sincerely

BETTER WIDGETS LIMITED

Larry Smith

Larry Smith

OWNER

Final reminder

This time go straight to the top.



Dear Mrs James

OVERDUE ACCOUNT

We have struck a serious problem in our business relationship and I need to ask you to take a personal interest.

We have sent your accounts department two reminders to pay an account dated February 27. Both were marked 'attention Paul Jones'. Paul did not reply and his assurance when I spoke to him on the telephone came to nothing.

Unless we receive your payment by July 5, we will have to close your account and ask our solicitor to take action.

The invoice number is 574671.

Naturally, we would be delighted to see our business relationship back to normal before then.

Sincerely

BETTER WIDGETS LIMITED

Larry Smith

Larry Smith
OWNER

'We have already paid you.'



Dear Mr Williams

INVOICE 86263

Thank you for your letter about invoice 86263.

I have checked our records and bank statements and they confirm that we have already paid the full amount.

We transferred the amount into your bank account on May 6 and used the invoice number as a reference. Please call me if you need any more information about it.

Sincerely

ABACUS CORPORATION

John Adams

John Adams

SENIOR ACCOUNTS OFFICER

'Your invoice is incorrect.'

You might be irritated by the error, but good relationships with suppliers are valuable. It's worth being at least civil, but it's especially important to make your letter direct, so be specific about administrative details, and clear about what is wrong and what you want done. If you don't already know it, it's worth asking your supplier's receptionist for the name of the person who handles your invoices.



Subject: incorrect invoice

Hi John

I need your help with two errors in invoice AV674210.

You'll see from the attached quotation that Jones Print quoted \$800.00 for printing our letterheads, but on the invoice the figure is increased to \$900.00.

The invoice also lists artwork, but we supplied the artwork. The quote was simply for the printing.

We would appreciate a credit note for \$900 and a new invoice for \$800.00.

Regards

Jasmine Smith

OFFICE MANAGER

Customers and suppliers

You can set your organisation apart by being human. Leave the stuffy language for your competitors. Use our keys *informal* and *personal* so that each contact develops your relationship.

You will want to keep it simple, direct and active as well, and you should aim to have your readers think, 'These people are good to deal with'.

'We accept your quote.'

Lighten up. You may be announcing the result of an important decision, but you have everything to gain by taking the opportunity to build your relationship with your supplier.



Dear Mr Jones

CONSTRUCTION OF STORAGE SHED

We accept your quotation for the construction of our storage shed.

Your price of \$81,256.00 plus GST was not the lowest, but we were impressed by your company's experience and references. We were also impressed by your quick response to our invitation to put in a proposal.

We need to attend to the paper work as soon as possible. Please call me to make an appointment next week.

Sincerely

H L SMITH AND SON LIMITED

William Smith

William Smith

MANAGING DIRECTOR

'We're moving.'

When many businesses change address they simply announce the new one, missing an opportunity to develop the relationship with their customers.

It is also a time when your business is vulnerable. When you change location your customers may wonder whether your new location would be convenient for them, or if it's even worth the trouble of changing their records.

Focus on your readers and overcome any objections in advance.



Dear Mr Jones

BIG NEW STORE AT RAILWAY CUTTING

We are about to make it even more rewarding to be a Prestons client.

You'll discover some important changes when you come to our new store at Railway Cutting. We're confident that we'll be offering you the best range of protective clothing in Newtown and the most comfortable, convenient way to select what you need.

Here's our new address from April 13:

15 Railway Cutting
West Churnside
NEWTOWN

Our new store is just 100 metres south of the over-bridge and there's plenty of parking.

I hope you'll call in soon and make use of the discount voucher.

Yours sincerely

PRESTONS CLOTHING LIMITED

Leonard P Smith

Leonard Smith

CUSTOMER SERVICES MANAGER

'We can't agree with your complaint.'

People who complain are doing you a service. According to the research firm Colmar Brunton, nearly 40 per cent of unhappy customers go elsewhere. Most won't give you the opportunity to put things right.

Stating the facts isn't enough. People who complain are expressing their feelings. It's very important to acknowledge the feelings as well as the facts.

Your letter should show that you have taken a personal interest in the complaint. See your reply as a chance to rebuild a damaged relationship, even if you feel you have done nothing wrong. It's the customer's perception that counts.



Dear Mrs Jones

Thank you for your letter telling us that you were unhappy with the prices of the air flow meters and connector hoses.

I showed your letter to our general manager of customer services, Jayne Mitchell. We checked the prices several of our competitors are charging. Our prices were slightly lower and we were the only company in our modest survey to include an extended guarantee.

I do understand your frustrations with rising costs, but I believe that our high quality products give excellent value overall.

Thank you for being our customer for more than five years, and for giving us the opportunity to reply.

Sincerely
ENGINEERING SOLUTIONS LIMITED

Joseph Smith

Joseph Smith
CUSTOMER SERVICES REPRESENTATIVE

'Yes, your complaint is justified.'

Acknowledge the feelings as well as the facts and imagine you are talking to the customer in the same room.

Most people send out formal letters with very little that's specific to the complaint. Such letters suggest that they didn't read the complaint and perhaps that their organisation gets too many of them to treat complaints separately.

Show a personal interest. Make it simple, appropriately informal, direct and active. Be open in your apologies and generous in making amends. Most people who take the trouble to complain can be persuaded to remain a customer. They just want their complaint taken seriously and their feelings acknowledged.



Dear Mr Smith

Thank you for your detailed letter about the frustrations you have had with the 6.45pm bus from Courtney Square.

I certainly agree that we failed you. The bus left five minutes before the advertised time on all three days. I can only assure you that it was a genuine mistake by a driver who was helping out while your regular driver was on sick leave.

We are disappointed that we let you down, but we appreciated hearing from you so that we could correct the problem. We can not take away the inconvenience, but I hope you will use the concession cards so that we can restore your confidence in our service.

Sincerely
SWIFT TRANSPORT LIMITED

Ron Jones

Ronald Jones
OPERATIONS MANAGER
Encl: five concession cards.

'It's not good enough!'

If you want results from your complaint, be direct. Give enough detail to help your supplier investigate. Even a complaint can be in conversational language. Aim for appropriate informality.



Subject: Problems with help desk

Good morning Connie

We have had some problems with your 'help desk' service this month. I need to discuss them with you in the next few days and thought you would want to see the details first.

We have been logging our calls to the help desk since the problems began.

- On April 16, 18, 25 and 29, several of our staff were kept on hold for up to five minutes.
- On April 16 and 29, two of our staff reported that operators spoke to them rudely and seemed reluctant to take their calls or give their names.
- On April 18, I called and asked for your help desk supervisor. She was out and did not reply to my message to call back.

Your staff do seem to be under pressure, but we can't continue to use your service if it does not improve.

I will be in touch.

Ray Jones

'Tell us more'



Subject: Gelatine

Hi Fiona

Thank you for sending us the brochure. We found it a useful introduction, but we have some specific questions.

Is your gelatine suitable for the machines we plan to use to produce our confectionery range next year? (The attachment gives the machine's specifications and performance.)

- Can Gelatine World guarantee at least 150kg of gelatine per week from February 1 to December 14?
- Is the current price guaranteed for at least a year?

I will contact you in the next week so that we can talk over each of the questions I have raised.

Best wishes

Jocelyn Jones

'Would you like to visit?'



Subject: Gelatine

Hi Jocelyn

I have been thinking about our conversation on Friday.

Would you find it useful to visit our factory? You would be able to see how we make the gelatine and assure yourself of the quality. I can also show you our latest technology.

I have spoken to our engineering manager, Anna Packard, and she would be very pleased to meet you and discuss any concerns you may have about quality or delivery.

If you'd like to come, just give me a call on extension 7663. I'd be happy to arrange it.

Regards

Fiona Smith

'Thanks for the excellent service'

Make your praise as specific as your complaints. Being specific is an aspect of direct, the third of our five keys to effective writing. Name names – that's just one way of getting personal.



Dear Mr Jones

I want to thank you for the excellent service your team gave us last Friday.

We rang to arrange for a large parcel to be delivered across town. It was four o'clock and our client needed it before five.

Susan Kingston took the call and understood the urgency immediately. She arranged for Tony Travis to pick up the parcel within a few minutes, then Peter Turner rang us back at about five to five to assure us that it had arrived.

We rarely ask for special treatment, but when we needed it your team willingly gave it. They are a credit to you.

Many thanks.

Sincerely

INDUSTRIAL INSTRUMENTS LIMITED

Clyde Smith

Clyde Smith

OPERATIONS MANAGER

'Your account is not justified.'

Give enough background for your letter to stand alone, so that your supplier does not need to find the previous correspondence to understand it. Keep it simple and direct – which includes saying what you want your reader to do.



Dear Mrs Smith

DISPUTED INVOICE

Thank you for your reply to my enquiry about a 23 minute call to Japan on April 3.

I was surprised to see that you have not amended our account.

We did not make the call and believe that we should not have to pay for a lapse in your system.

We have paid our accounts promptly for the five years we have been in business. We have never contested any amount. You might ask yourself why we would suddenly choose to protest about an account for \$30.88.

Please send us a credit note.

Sincerely

GENERAL METALS LIMITED

Grant Jones

Grant Jones

ADMINISTRATION MANAGER

'We are not paying this!'



Dear Mr Jones

INVOICE 56352

I am returning a copy of your account for repairs to our printer. We will not be paying it and you may want to review your service when you read our reasons.

Our office manager called your firm around 10 am on May 14 to say that our printer was not picking up paper from the fold-down in-tray. She asked for an urgent response because it was the only printer we had.

Your technician arrived at 4.30 pm, made no apology for being late and took a quarter of an hour to examine the machine before saying that your company does not repair our brand.

If your receptionist had told us that you do not repair our brand, we could have called another firm immediately.

We believe that you owe us an apology and a credit note for the full \$75.86.

Yours sincerely

CAMDEN BIOLOGICALS LIMITED

Peter S Smith

Peter S Smith. PhD.

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Sorry. We got it wrong

Be open about the mistake. Apologise and acknowledge the customer's feelings.



Dear Dr Smith

INVOICE 56352

We do indeed owe you an apology and a credit note.

We take pride in our service, but it is clear that in your case it was well below our usual standard.

I am sorry we did not tell you that we were unable to repair your brand of printer, that we arrived so much later than you needed and that we sent you an account. I would have been annoyed if it had happened to us.

Your letter did encourage us to review our service. We are sure that it was a rare event and hope that you will continue to consider us when you need any other brands of office equipment repaired or replaced.

Thank you for taking the trouble to write to me.

Yours sincerely

OFFICE EQUIPMENT LIMITED

Neil Jones

Neil Jones

BRANCH MANAGER

Encl: credit note for \$75.86.

'Here's our side of the story. Please pay up.'



Dear Dr Smith

INVOICE 56352

Thank you for your letter questioning our account for \$75.86. I have investigated the circumstances carefully and believe the account is fully justified.

Our receptionist remembers asking your office manager which brand of printer you operate and that he replied, 'I don't know. Does it matter? Just fix it will you'. Your Kamakuza brand is rare, so our receptionist decided to accept the job. I believe it was the correct decision.

We cannot provide spare parts for Kamakuza printers, but our technician made a conscientious effort to check whether he could fix your machine without replacing parts. It was soon clear that he could not and he abandoned the visit so that you did not incur further cost.

Clearly, it would have been better if we had known the brand of your printer and had referred your office manager to another company, but we did ask.

We would appreciate prompt payment.

Yours sincerely

OFFICE EQUIPMENT LIMITED

Neil Jones

Neil Jones

BRANCH MANAGER

'Thanks for the business.'

It's too valuable an opportunity to miss. Thank clients for choosing you. Help them to feel good about what may have been a difficult choice. It's an opportunity to build relationships. Look for ways of making it informal and personal. Let's say you've decided to send an email.



Subject: Design project

Good morning Frances

Thanks for choosing Smith, Smith and Smythe. I'm delighted to welcome you as a client and I know that Sarah and her team are looking forward to working with you on the re-design of your offices.

We set ourselves very high standards of service and I want to encourage you to expect excellence from us.

Sarah will be in touch within the next few days. I hope to meet you during your next visit.

John Smith Snr
Chief Executive

'You missed something important.'

If your customer sends you an order or a request that's incomplete, be careful to avoid blame when you ask for clarification. Instead, treat the omission as an opportunity to enhance your business relationship.

For example, let's imagine that you sell cars to businesses and your commercial customer has sent you an order for five cars, but hasn't told you what colour she wants. You would probably send an email.



Subject: Colours for sedans

Hello Sue

Thanks for the order for the five sedans. I confirm that we can supply them with all the specifications you listed and at the prices on your order form.

Do you have any preferences for colours?

The attachment shows the XL model in white and red, but we can also supply it in silver, burgundy and blue.

We have XLs in all the available colours in the yard and showroom at the moment. Do call me on my direct line 574 9597 if you would to come in to see them.

Once I have your decision on the colour (or colours) I can get your order underway and we should be able to deliver your XLs to each of the branches by the end of next week.

Regards

Peter Jones

SALES MANAGER

Employment Issues

'I resign.'

(Internal mail)



Dear Cynthia

I have decided to resign from my position as Customer Service Manager, Newtown Branch, from the end of the month.

I go with mixed feelings.

Steele and Company have offered me a position with some exciting challenges, but I will miss the team at Bates Brothers.

Thank you for all your support and encouragement throughout the five years I have been with the Newtown branch.

Sincerely

J. Smith

Jane Smith
SALES REPRESENTATIVE

'Sorry you're leaving.'

(Internal mail)



Dear Jane

We will be sorry to see you go.

You have been a valuable member of our team and several of the executive staff have already commented to me that you will be difficult to replace.

I have always appreciated the energy and good humour you brought to the team. I have admired your cool head and determination, especially when our deadline was so tight for the Rata Properties proposal last year.

You leave with our thanks and best wishes for your new job with Steele and Company.

Regards

Cynthia Jones

Cynthia Jones
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

'Ok, so you are leaving.'

(Internal mail)



Dear Bill

Thank you for your letter of resignation.

I have passed your departure date on to the payroll team so that they can have everything ready for your final cheque on September 4.

I was sorry to read that your two years with us have been such a disappointment to you.

Best wishes for your new venture in retailing.

Sincerely

Cynthia Jones

Cynthia Jones
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

> Apply now

REDEFINE YOUR FUTURE
**AXA GLOBAL GRADUATE
PROGRAM 2015**

redefining / standards 

agence.cdg - © Photonostop

'Sorry, no job going at the moment.'



Dear Paul

EMPLOYMENT ENQUIRY

Thank you for your interest in joining our sales team.

At the moment we don't have a position to offer you, but we were impressed with your c.v. and references, and would like to keep them on file. Please call me if you would prefer to have them returned.

I should add that vacancies only come up occasionally, so it would pay to keep looking.

Good luck!

Yours sincerely

RADICAL MARKETING

James Jones

James Jones

PERSONNEL MANAGER

'Congratulations. Let's negotiate.'



Dear Catherine

VACANCY FOR ENGINEER

We are delighted to let you know that you are our preferred candidate for the job.

The panel was impressed with your c.v. and your interview and we all hope we will be able to welcome you to our team once the negotiations are complete.

Please call me in the next few days so that we can arrange to negotiate the terms of employment and a salary package.

Congratulations.

Sincerely

JONES JACOBSEN AND JOHNSTON

Anthony Jones

Anthony Jones
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

'You did well, but missed out.'



Dear Derek

VACANCY FOR ENGINEER

Thank you for your interest in joining our team.

The panel was impressed with your qualifications and your interview, but we have decided to offer the position to another candidate.

You might like to know that you were near the top of a list of 115 candidates—many of them with at least 10 years of relevant experience.

Best wishes in your search for your first appointment.

Sincerely

JONES JACOBSEN AND JOHNSTON

Anthony Jones

Anthony Jones
CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Encl: curriculum vitae and reference.

'Thanks for applying.'



Dear Mr Smith

VACANCY FOR ENGINEER

Thank you for replying to our advertisement.

We looked through your application and curriculum vitae carefully, but have decided to offer the position to another candidate.

I wish you success in finding a position with another organisation.

Sincerely

JONES JACOBSEN AND JOHNSTON

Anthony Jones

Anthony Jones

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

Encl: curriculum vitae and two references.

Warning letter

A warning letter should always follow some discussion in which you give your employee the opportunity to explain. A false step could cost your organisation dearly. Employment law says you must be fair and act in good faith at each stage. A written warning is for the record, so don't hesitate to tell the reader what he already knows. Simplicity and directness are essential.



Dear John

FORMAL WARNING

We need a written record of our discussion.

I am formally warning you that I may terminate your employment with us if you fail to complete the customer service training I have arranged for you, or continue to be rude or discourteous to our customers.

This morning we discussed each of 10 incidents that have upset customers and you accepted that my notes on them were accurate. You also accepted that in seven of the incidents you used inappropriate language or were rude to the customers who later complained to me.

I have always appreciated your extensive knowledge of our products and your willingness to work long hours. I hope you will commit yourself to improving your relationships with customers so that you can continue to be part of the team.

Sincerely

JONES JACOBSEN AND JOHNSTON

Anthony Jones

Anthony Jones

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

'Here's the job for you.'

Most people write job ads that read like public notices. It's a pity because they miss an opportunity to *sell* the job to a wide range of candidates and advertise the qualities and values of their organisation. Make sure you offer some benefits.



MANAGER, FIRST IMPRESSIONS

Enjoy working with people? Ready for a challenge?

We're looking for someone with a proven record in customer service.

You'll greet our customers at reception, take their calls and messages, and listen to their needs and preferences. You'll get to know them.

Here's the challenge.

It's not an ordinary receptionist role. We have exceptionally high standards. We'll give you training, but we'll expect you to be an exceptional person. Every day.

You'll enjoy it - not only the challenge of such a vital role, but the culture at Masons.

You'll be joining a team of positive people.

Ready to join the market leaders?

Contact...

'Here's the job for you.'

Here's a more low-key style, but still incorporating benefits and conveying the qualities and values of the organisation. Be very specific about what you are offering and what you require.



CHEF FOR COUNTRY HOTEL

Here's the offer

- A chance to produce fine cuisine for discerning customers from all over the world
- Generous days off
- Opportunities for skiing, tramping or sightseeing in one of the most scenic locations in the country
- Subsidised accommodation

Here's what you'll need

- An exemplary record in preparing fine cuisine
- Creative flair
- The ability to lead a team under pressure
- Energy and enthusiasm
- An appropriate qualification

You'll be joining a modern hotel and a team with a reputation for excellence in food and hospitality.

Send your cv to...

Colleagues and friends in business

We'll assume here that a telephone call or a personal visit isn't practical, or that you want to provide a written record. Your letters to colleagues and friends may break more conventions – they may even be casual, depending of course on the closeness of your relationship.

LIGS University based in Hawaii, USA

is currently enrolling in the
Interactive Online **BBA, MBA, MSc,**
DBA and PhD programs:

- ▶ enroll **by October 31st, 2014** and
- ▶ **save up to 11%** on the tuition!
- ▶ pay in 10 installments / 2 years
- ▶ Interactive **Online education**
- ▶ visit www.ligsuniversity.com to
find out more!

Note: LIGS University is not accredited by any
nationally recognized accrediting agency listed
by the US Secretary of Education.
More info [here](#).



'Thank you'

Be specific about what you appreciated. If you can, provide some evidence of its effect or some element of *news*.



Subject: Thank you

Hi Peta

Thanks for all your help with the marketing plan. You did a wonderful job.

I sent the plan to the directors yesterday and two of them have already mentioned how impressed they are with your research, your reasoning and your graphs. The chairman asked about your background.

Thanks too for your enthusiasm, especially when the pressure was on.

I really enjoyed working with you.

Regards

Paula

Condolences

Feelings are paramount. Don't hesitate to express them, but strive for genuine emotional support rather than either the gushiness or aloofness that comes with clichés. The detail will depend on the closeness of your relationship, but if it's a death, aim to make your initial contact short.

Let's say you have been unable to contact your employee by telephone and decide to send an email.



Hi Paul

I am thinking of you. We all are.

It was a dreadful shock to hear of Lynda's death and I've found it impossible to concentrate on anything else this morning.

The office is very subdued. We are all pre-occupied with the news of the accident and feelings of support for you and your family.

Please don't feel under any additional pressure from work. We've cleared your appointments and Sandra will keep in touch with your clients till you are ready to return.

Please let me know if there's anything we can do.

I hope we can talk soon.

Regards
Peter

Form letters

Form letters are time-savers for routine issues, but most are stuffy. Make them appropriately informal. It's not always necessary to make them personal, in the sense of appearing to be written especially for reader, but it's better service and easy to do.

Ensure that you review them regularly. It's surprising how easily they can go out of date in subtle ways, and you might be horrified to discover that they've been sent out for months with wording that now makes you wince.

'Application received.'



Dear

Thank you for your application for

We received it on and we expect to have a decision for you by.....

If you have an additional information or any questions about the licensing process please call the committee secretary

..... on..... It's a direct line.

Sincerely

'Please sign here.'



Dear.....

Thank you for your I have completed the forms for you and now just need your signature on pages.....so that we can go ahead.

I suggest you read the contract carefully before you add your signature.

Please keep the yellow copy in a safe place and send the white and green copies back to me as soon as possible.

Our head office staff usually take less than a week to process applications. I will email when the funds are available.

Sincerely

Miscellaneous

'Thanks. You did well.'

Get personal, with appropriate informality. Lofty, cold, impersonal writing will make your thanks seem grudging. Tell your reader how much you and others appreciated the work. Be specific (that's direct) in your praise. Include any reservations so that it's not gushy, but if you genuinely intend to praise, allow for the fact that, for many people, reservations or criticism often carry more weight than congratulations. Include the next step or some element of news.



Dear Graeme

I read your report last night and I'm impressed.

I'm not totally convinced about the staffing levels you're recommending, but you've put together a carefully-reasoned report with an admirable range of original, practical ideas that will get the whole team thinking.

Peter was in this morning. He shares my enthusiasm for your report (and even agrees with you about the staffing).

We need some action before the end of the month. Could you come to Head Office sometime next week for a meeting with the senior team?

Congratulations. It's a valuable contribution.

Regards

Nicole Smith

CHIEF EXECUTIVE

'Please reply.'

Sometimes, when you want your readers to reply, there's very little in it for them. The challenge is to find some kind of benefit, perhaps as simple as feeling good about helping. You should also make your letter informal and personal. Tell them how easy it will be to respond.



Dear Mrs Williams

A CHANCE TO HAVE YOUR SAY

Here's a chance to express some frank opinions, and get results.

Although we haven't done business together so far, I would be grateful if you could take a few minutes to complete the questionnaire.

We don't need names, but we would value your comments on the service, décor, facilities and catering of the conference venues you've used.

You'll be helping to lift the standards of most of the venues in this city.

Let me explain that.

You'll be helping us discover what people who hold conferences value most. It's such a competitive business we can be sure that the other venues will match the changes we make, perhaps within a few months. Even if you never do business with us, you'll benefit. (Of course we'd like to talk to you about being a client too, but that's a separate issue.)

Thank you, in anticipation.

OVATION CONFERENCES

T. Jones

Tracy Jones

MARKETING MANAGER

'I'd like to make an appointment.'

This kind of letter works well for salespeople wanting to set up appointments, but it's suitable for anyone who wants to introduce an idea and encourage the reader to consider a meeting.

The words 'I plan to call you soon...' will almost ensure that your reader reads it all. Referring to what other clients appreciate allows you to state benefits obliquely, so that you are not telling the reader what would be good for her.



Dear Mrs Jones

SOLUTIONS FOR HR MANAGERS

I plan to call you soon and thought you might appreciate some background first.

Efficient Software distributes software designed especially for human resource managers.

The About Us page on our website will tell you more.

I would appreciate a few minutes on the telephone to explore whether it would be worth meeting to look at how we might be able to help you.

I would need to do some listening before I could suggest anything specific, but many of our clients particularly appreciate having software designed for their needs. For others, the main benefit is the convenience of our in-house coaching programmes or having a local help desk.

I'll be in touch in the next few days.

Sincerely

EFFICIENT SOFTWARE

Rachel Smith

Rachel Smith

SALES REPRESENTATIVE

'Thanks for the meeting.'

You might write one of these letters as a courtesy when you are particularly grateful for the opportunity to meet. Keep it simple and informal. Avoid clichés and see if you can find something new to mention – perhaps a development since the discussion or some additional information that extends the discussion, or illustrates how useful it was.



Dear Jennifer

I appreciated your time on Tuesday, especially in such a busy week.

Your thoughts on the 'glass ceiling' issue have been especially useful and I have decided to put them into a separate article to accompany the main feature. Unless you have any objection, we would like to use the photograph we took last year for your profile.

I've had several animated conversations with my women colleagues about the key points you made. I'm sure there'll be many more throughout the country once the next edition of *Women in Business* goes out.

Many thanks.

Sincerely

WOMEN IN BUSINESS MAGAZINE

Patsy Jones

Patsy Jones

STAFF WRITER

'Thanks for the sales meeting.'

Salespeople should write more thank you messages. Even if you leave your card, it's too easy for the prospective client to forget you and the meeting. Use the letter or email to advance the relationship. You should always give yourself a task at the end of meetings with prospective clients and you can refer to the brochure, report or website link you promised.



Dear Mr Williams

Thanks for the opportunity to meet on Friday. I appreciated the time that you put into our discussion and found your experience with the many brands on the market particularly useful.

I have been following up the concerns you had about how the heating elements might perform in heavy frosts and our engineers tell me that the elements for the X25 model are designed to operate in temperatures down to minus 30 degrees Celsius.

The brochure I promised has the P24 and ZL4 models. I'd like to contact you so that we can discuss which would be most appropriate for the trial you suggested.

Thanks again.

Sincerely

GLOBAL TRANSPORT SOLUTIONS

James Smythe

James Smythe

SALES REPRESENTATIVE

Encl: brochures for P24 and ZL4.

8 BE MORE PERSUASIVE

When I ask people in workshops to describe typical salespeople, out come the clichés: ‘untrustworthy, insincere, greasy, pushy, looking after number one’.

‘But we are all in sales,’ I tell them. There’s usually only a slight pause, then a smile or two. They know what I’m getting at. The accountants, the engineers, scientists and secretaries may not have thought about it as selling, but they all sell ideas. Teachers sell ideas, lawyers do, so do mums and dads with teenagers.

Is it useful to agree that we are all in sales?

Yes. If we are in the same business, let’s find out what professional salespeople do and adapt their methods to our emails, letters, reports, proposals, presentations and even conversations. While we are at it, let’s do the same with the techniques orators and marketing people use.

I’m not suggesting that you should adopt a slick, hype-laden, insincere style that reads or sounds like a sales script or imitation oratory. But pick up the techniques and then apply them in language that’s right for you and your readers or audience.

First, let’s note something about modern professional salespeople, the ones who sell the higher-value products and services for a living. Selling and salespeople are changing fast, especially in business-to-business selling. Even in car sales you are less likely to meet a hyena in a loud jacket and mirror sunglasses slapping you on the shoulder as he says, ‘Have I got a great deal for you!’ Career salespeople are far more interested in discovering our needs and matching them, than twisting our arms. They have to be more sophisticated, because as buyers we are. They also know that they can earn enormous rewards by selling to us in a way that earns our trust and builds a long-term relationship so that we keep going back. As writers, we are just as interested in focusing on our readers’ interests and building relationships.

Pre-empt objections

It used to be a ‘well known fact’ in selling that the more objections prospective customers raise, the more likely it is they will buy. The research shows it’s not true. A far more effective way of selling an idea is to pre-empt objections – to carry out a pre-emptive strike on those objections before they raise them. It sounds aggressive, but it’s a very open and honourable way to persuade. You’ll deserve to be more persuasive because you will have taken the trouble to see your proposal or recommendation from your readers’ perspective.

Pre-empting objections is a great way to test whether your arguments are strong enough. You'll be the first person to persuade.

Step 1. Be clear about your proposal.

Step 2. Imagine you are your readers. Why wouldn't they accept your argument? What objections might they raise? What objections might they be thinking of but not tell you? What have they said before on the subject? Give some thought to how you might pre-empt them. I like to imagine my readers with a bit of attitude, because it's important to face the reality of their objections.

Step 3. Write their possible objections so simply and directly that they deserve an exclamation mark. Put them in quotes so that you can imagine them saying those words.

Let's suppose that you want to persuade your management team to start every working week with an organised social hour for all the staff, first thing Monday morning. You can imagine the objections.

Possible Objections

'It would be a waste of work time!'

'They'll come to work drunk!'

'It won't achieve anything!'

'We need people at reception, so some will miss out!'

Pre-empting the Objection

'We'll be enjoying ourselves, but we'll still be working. We can use the time to think together as a team, focusing on our goals for the coming week.'

'We would be spending the best part of the first hour socialising around the photocopier anyway.'

'We won't provide alcohol.'

'People are more productive if they can form networks outside their own departments.'

'We will roster two different people to sit in for the receptionists each week.'

Notice that in the process we've modified the proposal, by saying that we won't be offering alcohol. Often when we examine the objections we realise that a proposal isn't saleable in its present form. It's better to abandon that part of the proposal before it destroys the rest.

Sometimes, an objection will be valid, but not fatal to our case. It may be true that some people will miss out, but we can concede that and argue that most people will be able to attend most of the time.

In a report, you might offer two options, concede that Option 2 is more expensive, but argue that would give the best value for money over the next five years. The extra expense is a likely objection, but it may not be fatal to your case. If it would be, offer only the cheaper option, or maybe nothing.

There are many standard objections to proposals and recommendations and they give us a focus for report and proposal writing.

| Possible Objections | How to pre-empt the Objection |
|------------------------------|---|
| ‘It will cost too much!’ | Show value for money or how you can pay for it by giving up something else in the budget or finding a new source of funds. |
| ‘It’s impractical!’ | Show how practical it is. Cite previous experiences, provide a time line, focus on the resources available to do the project. |
| ‘It’s not well thought out!’ | Show your reasoning and the evidence. Provide details, references and authorities. |
| ‘It’s just too big!’ | Show how you can manage the project in manageable steps. Show the costs (including opportunity costs) if your readers choose the ‘Do nothing’ option. |
| ‘We don’t need it!’ | List the benefits and, if possible, quantify them. Show the consequences of doing nothing. |

How open should I be?

You usually have to make a choice with objections: will you bring the objection out into the open or not? For instance, you may be writing a proposal for a prospective client who knows very little about your company, your company's reputation and the quality of its products and services. The objection forming in the prospect's mind is, 'I don't know these people, so I don't know whether to trust them.' To raise the objection you might write, 'You may be wondering whether we can be trusted'. Clearly, it's not a good idea. Sometimes your judgement tells you that putting the objection into words may create a negative memory. Instead, just show that it doesn't apply. You might want to tell your prospective client how long your company has been in business, list some of the more important projects your company has completed and quote some comments from delighted clients. It's not always important that we state the objection, only that we pre-empt it.

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EXAMPLE: pre-empting objections.



Pre-empting an
objection

Pre-empting an
objection

Subject: Vehicle Fleet

Hi Peter

I have been thinking about your comments on the standard of our vehicles and your concerns about the cost of replacing them.

At the next management meeting, I'm going to recommend that we sell all our executive and sales cars and lease replacements.

Leasing will remove the problem of raising capital to buy new cars. In fact, we could probably release \$2.6 million by selling the existing fleet.

It is a good time to change. Anna says the maintenance bills have increased 30 per cent in the last year and she's convinced that the smaller cars are not suited to the distances the sales staff are doing now.

Give me a call if you would like to talk it through in more detail.

Regards
Jocelyn

Paint pictures

The civil rights leader Martin Luther King knew how to sell an idea. The formal language of orators won't help us write better letters, reports and presentations, but their selling skills will.

Picture this. It is August 1963. Martin Luther King looks out from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC. Before him are two hundred and fifty thousand Americans. The television cameras and cluster of microphones reveal that the world is watching and listening. Martin Luther King's emotions surge as the audience responds to the first two minutes of his carefully prepared speech. He abandons his notes, finds new inspiration and, as his voice soars out over that crowd, he creates history with pictures.

I have a dream that one day...right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

The crowd's reaction is stunned silence, then tumultuous applause. In the same speech he spoke of his dream that, '...one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood'. It continued ad-libbed, full of rich imagery, much of it biblical. Painting pictures is a standard technique of oratory.

So how can we use pictures in business writing and presentations to the staff or our clients? It's easy. Provide details that build mental pictures, but keep the images simple. Paint pictures your readers or audience can relate to. Avoid contrivances. Use all the keys to effective writing. Being specific is *direct*. Make your language appropriately *informal* and your pictures won't come across as imitation oratory. Get *personal* by telling your readers or audience who was there and what each person did and said or how they were affected.

EXAMPLE: painting pictures.



Subject: Software Installation

Hello John

I need to put on record our dissatisfaction with the software your company has installed for us.

It has not lived up to the promises in your proposal and the whole experience has been frustrating and costly.

The system is unreliable and continues to disrupt our business.

Let me give you an example.

At 8.30 this morning our staff arrived to find two of your technical staff at work and the system off-line.

By 9.00 we had sales staff calling from branches all around the country wanting to know what was happening. Altogether, they had already hand-written more than a hundred packing slips and receipts for customers which they would have to type into the system later.

At 9.25 we had to stop production at our factory in Mount Wellington.

The system was back on-line at 10.05am.

Please ring to make an appointment so that we can discuss urgent action to upgrade the system, or remove it.

Sincerely
Claude Jones
Chief Executive
Fresh Foods Corporation

Persuade with the power of analogy

Martin Luther King's picture of the children holding hands is not only a word picture, but an analogy, because it encourages us to make a connection with a wider argument about racism. The analogy is another favourite device of orators, but it's no modern invention. It wasn't new even when Jesus came up with the parable of the good Samaritan.

Choose your analogy well and you'll have a powerful tool of persuasion. Often a graphic and relevant analogy will be far more persuasive and memorable than a detailed argument.

President Franklin Roosevelt used an analogy when he wanted to persuade Americans to help Britain with the lend-lease programme in 1940.

He asked who would not lend a hose to a neighbour whose house was on fire. Yes, we would certainly lend the hose, so helping a nation by lending ships seems more acceptable.

In the House of Commons Winston Churchill denounced appeasers to Germany with the line, 'An appeaser is one who feeds the crocodile, hoping it will eat him last.' A graphic picture and a persuasive analogy.

In 1946 Churchill added a hand-written line to his speech to Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri.

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, *an iron curtain* has descended across the continent.

It wasn't original. He had even used it before himself, but it suited the occasion. There's much more substance to the speech than that memorable image, yet it's often referred to as Churchill's Iron Curtain Speech. It became a cliché and journalists and politicians were still using it decades later.

But beware. An analogy is only justified if it fairly represents the wider argument. If you are comparing a company to an ageing elephant make sure that it is big and old and knows nothing about modern ideas of service or management.

There's another risk too. If your analogy is too elaborate it's likely that your readers will remember the scenery of the story and not your point. If you are writing for a presentation and sense that danger, it would pay to remind them of the point. I know professional speakers who ask the rhetorical question, 'And what was the point of that story? It's that...'

Pictures and analogies

EXAMPLE:



Specific examples
paint a picture

Analogy

Subject: Watching our costs

I keep being reminded of just how much it costs to run our branch.

Last month we were almost \$200 over our budget on telephone calls and more than \$300 over on general expenses including postage, courier firms and even cups of tea and biscuits.

At times, it's like trying to stay on a treadmill at the gym while someone turns up the speed.

I would really appreciate your help in keeping our overheads down.

Paula

Notice the analogy comparing the rising costs of running the office to running on a conveyer belt. The examples are specific and relevant to the readers.

Use the golden rule

Let's pick up some ideas from the marketers.

They use special words to highlight the ways we'll benefit:

This amazing window washer can reach up three storeys and bends *so that you* can clean even the skylights without a ladder.

Notice how 'so that you' highlights the ways we'll benefit so it encourages us to stay focused.

This respected magazine comes to you each week *so that you* can have regular briefings from people who specialise in keeping close to the market.

Persuasion has to be focused on the reader. Anything else is irrelevant.

We will close the production line on Tuesday afternoon *so that you* can come to the end of year barbecue.

You can emphasise, what's in it for your reader even more strongly by combining a 'you' with a question.

You might be wondering, What has this got to do with me?

You may be asking yourself, 'What's the connection between the changes in the Official Cash Rate and our future in exporting?'

'You' and a direct statement can work just as well.

You might be wondering how the changes will affect you. The first change you'll notice is...

You're probably thinking, I wouldn't do anything dishonest...

Successful marketers engage us. The most skilful achieve a conversational style that makes us think they are people like us, people we can relate to. Using personal words like *you*, *yours*, *I*, *we* and *ours*, help you to achieve that style. Write it just as you would say it, but with polish.

The power of negative argument

The negative argument has a special role. When your readers are *ambivalent*, saying, 'If we continue the way we are, we'll lose a significant share of the market' is likely to be more persuasive than, 'If we act now we can retain a significant share of the market.'

Smokers are ambivalent. They know they should give up, but they also know they like it. Their ambivalence explains why governments insist on negative messages such as 'smoking kills', 'smoking will harm your baby' and 'smoking causes lung cancer' on cigarette packets.

Your senior management team or board are likely to be ambivalent once you've persuaded them of the benefits of your project. They'll want the benefits, but maybe not the cost. Point out the costs of the 'do-nothing' option.

Take care with negative arguments. Lay it on too thickly and your readers will see it as pressure or manipulation. They'll back off and maybe question your motives.

Ask for action

If you want to persuade your readers to take action, you have to be direct. Tell them what you want done. Never just provide the facts and hope your readers or audience will reach the conclusion you want and then get around to doing something about it. Make it easy for them to say yes and take action immediately.

It can be difficult to decide when to ask for action. If you are doing a major selling job to a resistant audience, it would be best to leave it until you have pre-empted all the objections, but you must ask them to act.

Make it memorable

Ideally, you want to persuade them for life. You certainly want them to remember your argument long enough to act on it, or use it to persuade other people. Let's use a little psychology on memory and learning. You'll find it particularly helpful for presentations, especially to large groups.

Psychologists have found that emotion and memory are linked. Many believe that some moderate emotional arousal is an essential ingredient in learning or remembering. Showing what's in it for us helps to raise our emotional level, but you can add emotion to most pictures without seeming artificial, simply by talking about humans and their feelings.

MEMO TO STAFF

Frankly, Michelle and I were embarrassed to discover just how badly we'd let the Highland Corporation down with our delivery, yet as a company we had been so confident in our promises and so proud of our record. It's time to act, and act quickly.

An opening to a presentation to people who help others find jobs...

I was unemployed myself once.

It was many years ago and it was only for a week. You'd say that I was just between jobs, but I had a young family, a large mortgage, and years of specialised training I was desperate to use. It was a frightening experience.

Today, when I see young people get a job, often after months of worry and struggle, it provokes in me an emotional response that I'm sure stems from that one week. I want them to succeed, so I want you to succeed and I'm delighted to be here this morning to make a contribution.'

A letter to a management team:

You can imagine Peter's feelings when he came to work the next morning. He'd worked 16 hour days on the New Flavours project, personally saved it from disaster several times and shown extraordinary determination and creativity over four months. Then, when it succeeded so spectacularly, nobody said a word of appreciation. We can give much better leadership than that. We can, and must, give credit where it's due. Always.

Don't be shy with emotions. You might include words such as confident, excited, disappointed, proud, delighted, frustrated, relaxed or optimistic.

Use an appropriate level of feelings or emotion, so that you are comfortable with it and your readers or audience accept it as accurate in the context. Anything more is propaganda, but emotions belong as naturally in written English as they do in conversation.

Keep in mind that most of us can only retain about seven *chunks* of information in our short-term memory. (The size of the chunk depends, amongst other things, on the reader's motivation.) When we reach our limit, we start replacing what we've already heard with new chunks. Be economical with your arguments. It's not what you tell them that counts, it's what they remember.

9 THE LAST WORD

There's nothing surprising or academic about effective writing. Our aim is simply to build a relationship with our reader and make our writing easy to read, absorb and remember.

Make a commitment to improving, not only your writing, but your communication generally. Everyday conversation gives us opportunities to develop our skills. Work on focusing on the other person's needs and interests and making your conversations simpler. Use more active language, be more direct and show the relevance of your topic to people, especially your readers and audiences. The golden rule of writing and the five keys are enough to make you an effective communicator. With practice, they will become a way of life.

Use the editing system so that you not only revise your work more efficiently, but become more familiar with the five keys. Before long, there'll be much less editing to do.

Become a critic. When you sense that any writing isn't working, be specific. Could it be simpler, more informal, direct, active or personal?



"I studied English for 16 years but...
...I finally learned to speak it in just six lessons"
Jane, Chinese architect

ENGLISH OUT THERE

Click to hear me talking before and after my unique course download

If you speak English fluently, you have an extraordinary skill. All you have to do is to use it in your writing in a focused way. The five keys to effective writing give you that focus.

Don't be put off by past disappointments or criticism. I've seen people who thought they had no potential become very competent business writers. All they needed was to release themselves from the burden of the supposed formal rules of business English and concentrate on communication.

Persuade your colleagues to change too. It's not difficult. You can persuade with examples. Even people who believe that the stuffy clichés give their writing authority or credibility are persuadable. If you can change the in-house style to the five keys, you'll be able to edit each other's work without having to do the major rewrites that take unnecessary time and demoralise writers.

We all need to persuade, and it's in everyone's interests that we learn how to persuade effectively. As we've seen, we need to do much more than simply provide what we believe to be relevant facts. The facts must be relevant to the reader's decision-making. Be clear about your proposal, then take some time to ask yourself why your readers would not accept it. Pre-empt those objections, paint pictures and acknowledge feelings.

See writing as a skill you can develop throughout your life. Above all, enjoy the richness of the English language.