

GUIDE TO BETTER BUSINESS WRITING

February 2013. Bryan A. Garner's blog series on business writing draws on advice in Garner's new book, the [*HBR Guide to Better Business Writing*](#).



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1. DON'T ANESTHETIZE YOUR COLLEAGUES WITH BAD WRITING

It seems obvious that you shouldn't put your audience to sleep, doesn't it? It should also be obvious to people who deliver [dull presentations](#) or talk in circles at dinner parties — but consider how many boring speakers you've had to endure.

The most engaging communicators avoid trite expressions, whether in conversation or in writing. They use strong, simple words. Think of Winston Churchill's famous phrase *blood, toil, tears, and sweat*. And remember what George Washington said when questioned about the fallen cherry tree: not "It was accomplished by utilizing a small, sharp-edged implement," but "I used my little hatchet."

When you write e-mails, reports, letters, and other documents, here's how to keep your readers alert and responsive:

Use personal pronouns skillfully. Don't overuse *I* (try not to begin paragraphs or successive sentences with it), but do lean heavily on *we*, *our*, *you*, and *your*. Those are friendly words that pull readers into a document.

Use contractions. Many writers have a morbid fear of contractions, having been taught in school to avoid them. But you won't be breaking any real rules if you use them — and they counteract stuffiness, a major cause of poor writing. Relax. If you'd say something as a contraction, then write it that way.

Avoid passive voice. Don't write "The closing documents were prepared by Sue"; instead, write "Sue prepared the closing documents." This guideline is hardly absolute — sometimes passive voice is the most natural way to say what you're saying. But if you develop a strong habit of using active voice, you'll largely prevent convoluted, backward-sounding sentences in your writing.

How do you identify passive voice? It's invariably a *be*-verb or *get*, plus a past-tense verb. Some examples:

- is + delivered
- are + finished
- was + awarded
- were + praised
- be + served
- got + promoted

Vary the length and structure of your sentences. Monotony, as Cicero once said, is in all things the mother of boredom. It's true of syntax no less than it's true of eating or anything else. Sameness cloy. So you want short sentences and long; main clauses and subordinate ones. You want variety.

Avoid alphabet soup. Readers find acronyms tiresome, especially ones they're not familiar with. Use them judiciously. It may be convenient to refer to COGS instead of spelling out "cost of goods sold." But if you also throw in acronyms such as ABC ("activity-based costing"), EBITDA ("earnings before interest, tax, depreciation, and amortization"), and VBM ("value-based management"), only the accountants in your audience will follow you — you'll lose everyone else. Small wonder, too. People don't want to master your arcane vocabulary to get what you're saying.

Surely you've had this experience as a reader: you encounter an acronym (a long one if you're particularly unlucky) and can't connect it with anything you've read in the document so far. You find yourself scanning backward through the text, hoping to find the first appearance of that acronym or else words that might fit it. By the time you find it (or give up trying), you've lost the writer's train of thought. Never put your own readers through that.

Stick to words when you can. Acronyms make writing easier but reading harder. Your shortcut is the reader's hindrance.

2. A WELL-CRAFTED LETTER STILL GETS THE JOB DONE

Business letters aren't a quaint thing of the past. Write them well, and you'll create a lot of goodwill with clients, partners, and vendors. You'll increase your profits, too — by getting key customers to renew large orders, for example, or persuading service providers to charge you less for repeat business.

Here are some pointers to help you get those kinds of results with your letters:

Focus on the reader. Motivate people to act by giving them reasons that matter to them. And try not to begin with the word *I*, make it *you*, if possible (*You were so kind*, *You might be interested*, and so on). Keep the reader in the forefront because — let's face it — that's what will hold her interest. Not: "I just thought I'd drop you a note to say that I really enjoyed my time as your guest last week." But instead: "What a wonderful host you were last week."

Use direct language. Write simply. Think of Olympic diving: neatly in, no splash, soon out. And if you're writing on behalf of your firm, use *we*. It's much warmer and friendlier than the passive voice (*It has been decided* vs. *We have decided*) or the impersonal third person (*this organization* vs. *we*).

You see canned phrases like *enclosed please find* and *as per* all the time in letters. They're high-sounding but low-performing. Your letters will be much clearer and more engaging without them. Some examples:

PHRASES TO AVOID IN LETTERS Replace pompous verbiage with language that's plain and clear.

NOT THIS	BUT THIS
Enclosed please find	Here are; Enclosed are
As per your request	As you requested
We are in receipt of	We've received
We shall advise you	We'll let you know
As per your letter	As your letter notes
We have your order and will transmit same	We'll forward your order promptly
We take pleasure	We're glad
Due to the fact that	Because
At an early date	Soon
In respect of the matter of	Regarding

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Ease into bad news. If you have a rejection to deliver, sandwich it between happier elements. Your readers can bear disappointment more easily if you begin on a genuine positive note and then explain the reason for the negative decision. They'll also be more likely to grant your wishes — make a purchase, sign up for your webinar, renew a membership — despite your denying theirs.

Recipients of bad news will probably be unhappy no matter what. But to some extent you can control just how unhappy they'll be. Be your best self. If your correspondent is rude, be polite; if anxious, be sympathetic; if confused, be lucid; if stubborn, be patient; if helpful, show gratitude; if accusatory, be reasonable and just in admitting any faults.

Don't write in anger. Say *please* and *thank you* — even in letters of complaint. Omit such courtesies, and you'll be dismissed as a crank. You can be courteous while still being direct.

When you receive unreasonable letters, don't respond in kind. That just starts a negative chain reaction. Approach complaints with a dedication to first-rate service. Write with the same warmth and friendliness you'd use in face-to-face conversations. If you or your company made a mistake, avoid the temptation to ignore it, to cover it up, or to shift the blame. Instead of deceiving readers, you'll provoke more ire. When you blunder, admit the error and say what you've done (or will be doing) to correct it. Stress the desire to improve service.

3. WRITE EMAILS THAT PEOPLE WON'T IGNORE

Your clients and colleagues don't have time to engage fully with every e-mail they get. Some of them receive hundreds of messages per day. That's why they start with the ones they can deal with quickly. They may never get around to answering — or even reading — the rest.

So how do you earn their attention? Try these tips:

Stick to standard capitalization and punctuation. Conventions of good writing may seem like a waste of time for e-mail, especially when you're tapping out messages on a handheld device. But it's a matter of getting things right — the little things. Even if people in your group don't capitalize or punctuate in their messages, stand out as

someone who does. Rushed e-mails that violate the basic norms of written language bespeak carelessness. And their abbreviated style can be confusing. It takes less time to write a clear message the first time around than it does to follow up to explain what you meant to say.

Get straight to the point (politely, of course). Be direct when making a request. Don't butter up the recipient first — although a brief compliment may help ("Great interview. Thanks for sending it. May I ask a favor?"). Spell out deadlines and other details the recipient will need to get the job done right and on time.

Be brief — but not too brief. People find long e-mails irksome and energy-sapping. The more they have to scroll or swipe, the less receptive they'll be to your message. They'll probably just skim it and miss important details — or skip it altogether. So rarely compose more than a single screen of reading. Focus your content, and tighten your language.

But as you're trimming the fat from your message, keep the meat intact. When giving a project update, for example, supply enough background information to orient your readers. Consider your message from their perspective. They aren't as immersed in your project as you are, and they probably have many other things going on. So remind them where things stood when you last sent an update, and describe what's happened since then.

Plot out what happened, and when. When a serious dispute arises at a company, the lawyers will typically ask their clients to produce a "chronology of relevant events," detailing the most important incidents leading up to the dispute. This document helps everyone involved think more clearly about how things unfolded. Try taking a similar approach when writing your e-mails. It will help you organize your thoughts into a coherent narrative. A story with a clear beginning, middle, and end will hold your readers' interest more effectively than jumbled facts interspersed with opinions.

Add a short but descriptive subject line. Before hitting "Send," check your subject line. If it's generic or blank, your message will get lost in your recipient's overstuffed inbox. Are you asking someone to take action? Highlight that in the subject line. Make your request easy to find — and fulfill.

Copy people judiciously. Include only those who will immediately grasp why they're on the thread; don't automatically click on "Reply All." Your correspondent may have been over inclusive with the "Copy" list, and if you repeat that mistake, you'll continue to annoy the recipients who shouldn't be there. And avoid using BCC unless you are quite sure it's necessary. It could get you a bad reputation as being indiscreet.

4. THOSE GRAMMAR GAFFES WILL GET YOU

People see your language as a reflection of your competence. Make lots of mistakes in your e-mails, reports, and other documents, and you'll come across as uneducated and uninformed. Others will hesitate to trust your recommendation to launch a resource-intensive project, for example, or to buy goods or services. They'll think you don't know what you're talking about.

Consider pronouns. Certain errors will predictably get you in trouble: "Just keep this matter between you and *I*," for instance, and "Tom and *her* will run the meeting."

Write instead: "Just keep this matter between you and *me*." And: "*She* and Tom will run the meeting."

The rule, very simply, is that *I*, *we*, *he*, *she*, and *they* are subjects of clauses — as in “Leslie and I were delighted to work with you.” *Me*, *us*, *him*, *her*, and *them* are objects of either verbs or prepositions: “You might want to consult with Leslie and *me*.” In the compound phrasings, try leaving out *Leslie and* — and you’ll know the correct form immediately.

Here are two other common problems to watch out for:

1. Subject-verb disagreement. A verb must agree in person and number with its subject.

I am aware of that.
You are aware of that.
Pat is aware of that.
We are all aware of that.

But syntax can make things tricky.

There is poses a problem because *There* appears to be the subject. It’s not. It’s what grammarians call an expletive — a word that stands in for the subject in an inverted sentence. The true subject follows the verb. So don’t write, “*There is* always risk and liability considerations.” Use *are* — your subject is *considerations*.

2. Double negatives. A double negative is easy to recognize in spoken dialect (“*We didn’t have no choice*”), but the problem can be more subtle in writing. Watch for the word *not* plus another word with a negative sense. Don’t write, “*We couldn’t scarcely* manage to keep up with the demand.” Write instead, “*We could scarcely* manage to keep up with the demand.”

How can you brush up on your grammar?

Read first-rate nonfiction — this helps you cultivate an appreciation of the skills you’re trying to acquire. Ask knowledgeable colleagues to proof your material and explain their corrections. And consult guides on grammar and usage to distinguish between the real rules and the artificial ones that plague so much writing.

For example, were you told in school never to begin a sentence with a conjunction? So was I. But look at all the *And*s and *But*s that begin sentences in high-quality prose. They’re everywhere. As sentence-starters, these words keep readers going smoothly with the train of thought. They’re short, sharp, and fleet. They don’t break any real rules — and they never have.

Grammatically, there’s nothing wrong with using *Additionally* and *However* as sentence-starters. But stylistically, they’re inferior. Multisyllabic connectors don’t join as cleanly and as tightly as monosyllables do.

It’s also perfectly acceptable to end a sentence with a preposition. The “rule” that you shouldn’t is a misbegotten notion based on Latin syntax and expounded by a few (a very few) 19th-century writers. Grammarians have long since dismissed it as ill-founded and unnecessary. Often a sentence with a terminal preposition sounds far more natural than the same sentence forced into avoiding one. Consider: *What will the new product be used for?* versus *For what purpose will the new product be used?*

Do you worry that your readers will *think* a sentence-starting conjunction or a sentence-ending preposition is wrong? They won’t even notice it. Good style gets readers focused on your clear, concise message. Bad style draws attention to itself.

5. A BIZSPEAK BLACKLIST

It's mission-critical to be plain-spoken, whether you're trying to be best-of-breed at outside-the-box thinking or simply incentivizing colleagues to achieve a paradigm shift in core-performance value-adds. Leading-edge leveraging of your plain-English skill set will ensure that your actionable items synergize future-proof assets with your global-knowledge repository.

Just kidding.

Seriously, though, it's important to write plainly. You want to sound like a person, not an institution. But it's hard to do, especially if you work with people who are addicted to buzzwords. It takes a lot of practice.

Back when journalists were somewhat more fastidious with the language than they are today, newspaper editors often kept an "index expurgatorius": a roster of words and phrases that under no circumstances (except perhaps in a damning quote) would find their way into print.

Here's such a list for the business writer. (Thanks to my [Twitter followers](#) for their contributions.) Of course, it's just a starting point — add to it as you come across other examples of bizspeak that hinder communication by substituting clichés for actual thought.

BIZSPEAK BLACKLIST————

actionable (apart from legal action)
agreeance
as per
at the end of the day
back of the envelope
bandwidth (outside electronics)
bring our A game
client-centered
come-to-Jesus
core competency
CYA
drill down
ducks in a row
forward initiative
going forward
go rogue
guesstimate
harvesting efficiencies
hit the ground running
impact, vb.
incent
incentivize
impactful
kick the can down the road
let's do lunch
let's take this offline
level the playing field
leverage, vb.
liaise

mission-critical
monetize
net-net
on the same page
operationalize
optimize
out of pocket (except in reference to expenses)
paradigm shift
parameters
per
planful
push the envelope
pursuant to
putting lipstick on a pig
recontextualize
repurpose
rightsized
sacred cow
scalable
seamless integration
seismic shift (outside earthquake references)
smartsized
strategic alliance
strategic dynamism
synergize
synergy
think outside the box
throw it against the wall and see if it sticks
throw under the bus
turnkey
under the radar
utilization, utilize
value-added
verbage (the correct term is *verbiage* — in reference only to verbose phrasings)
where the rubber meets the road
win-win

Many of these phrases have become vogueish in business — abstain if you can. Sometimes people use them to enhance their own sense of belonging or to sound “in the know.” Or they’ve been taught that good writing is hyperformal, so they stiffen up and pile on the clichés.

Hunt for offending phrases: Start looking for bizspeak in all kinds of documents, from memos to marketing plans, and you’ll find it everywhere. You’ll eventually learn to spot it — and avoid it — in your own writing. You’ll omit canned language such as *Attached please find* and other phrases that only clutter your message.

TRANSLATE YOUR BIZSPEAK Use language that's plain and clear.

NOT THIS	BUT THIS
at your earliest convenience	as soon as you can
in light of the fact that	because
we are in receipt of	we've received
as per our telephone conversation on today's date	as we discussed this morning
Pursuant to your instructions, I met with Roger Smith today regarding the above-mentioned.	As you requested, I met with Roger Smith today.
Please be advised that the deadline for the above-mentioned competition is Monday, April 1, 2013.	The deadline is April 1, 2013.
Thank you for your courtesy and cooperation regarding this matter.	Thank you.
Thank you in advance for your courtesy and cooperation in this regard. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions regarding this request.	Thank you. If you have any questions, please call.

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Writing plainly means expressing ideas as straightforwardly as you can — without sacrificing meaning or tone. Think of it as bringing your written voice into line with your spoken voice.

Bizspeak may seem like a convenient shorthand, but it suggests to readers that you're on autopilot, thoughtlessly using boilerplate phrases that they've heard over and over. Brief, readable documents, by contrast, show care and thought — and earn people's attention.
