



GETTING YOUR WRITTEN MESSAGE ACROSS CLEARLY **WRITING SKILLS**

A colleague has just sent you an email relating to a meeting you're having in one hour's time. The email is supposed to contain key information that you need to present, as part of the business case for an important project.

But there's a problem: the email is so badly written that you can't find the data you need. There are misspellings and incomplete sentences, and the paragraphs are so long and confusing that it takes you three times longer than it should to find the information you want. As a result, you're under-prepared for the meeting, and it doesn't go as well as you want it to.

Have you ever faced a situation similar to this? In today's information overload world, it's vital to communicate clearly, concisely, and effectively. People don't have time to read book-length emails, and they don't have the patience to scour badly constructed emails for "buried" points.

The better your writing skills are, the better the impression you'll make on the people around you – including your boss, your colleagues, and your clients. You never know how far these good impressions will take you!

In this article, we'll look at how you can improve your writing skills and avoid common mistakes.

Audience and Format

The first step to writing clearly is choosing the appropriate format. Do you need to send an informal **email**? Write a detailed **report**? Create advertising copy? Or write a formal letter?

The format, as well as your audience, will define your "writing voice" – that is, how formal or relaxed the tone should be. For instance, if you write an email to a prospective client, should it have the same tone as an email to a friend?

Definitely not.

Start by identifying who will read your message. Is it targeted at senior managers, the entire human resources team, or a small group of engineers? With everything you write, your readers, or recipients, should define your tone as well as aspects of the content.

Composition and Style

Once you know what you're writing, and for who you're writing, you actually have to start writing.

A blank, white computer screen is often intimidating. And it's easy to get stuck because you don't know how to start. Try these tips for composing and styling your document:



- **Start with your audience** – Remember, your readers may know nothing about what you're telling them. What do they need to know first?
- **Create an outline** – This is especially helpful if you're writing a longer document such as a report, presentation, or speech. Outlines help you identify which steps to take in which order, and they help you break the task up into manageable pieces of information.
- **Use AIDA** – If you're writing something that must inspire action in the reader, follow the **Attention-Interest-Desire-Action (AIDA)** formula. These four steps can help guide you through the writing process.
- **Try some empathy** – For instance, if you're writing a sales letter for prospective clients, why should they care about your product or sales pitch? What's the benefit for them? Remember your audience's needs at all times.
- **Use the Rhetorical Triangle** – If you're trying to persuade someone to do something, make sure that you communicate why people should listen to you, pitch your message in a way that engages your audience, and present information rationally and coherently. Our article on the **Rhetorical Triangle** can help you make your case in the most effective way.
- **Identify your main theme** – If you're having trouble defining the main theme of your message, pretend that you have 15 seconds to explain your position. What do you say? This is likely to be your main theme.
- **Use simple language** – Unless you're writing a scholarly article, it's usually best to use **simple**, direct language. Don't use long words just to impress people.

Structure

Your document should be as "reader friendly" as possible. Use headings, subheadings, bullet points, and numbering whenever possible to break up the text.

After all, what's easier to read – a page full of long paragraphs, or a page that's broken up into short paragraphs, with section headings and bullet points? A document that's easy to scan will get read more often than a document with long, dense paragraphs of text.

Headers should grab the reader's attention. Using **questions** is often a good idea, especially in advertising copy or reports, because questions help keep the reader engaged and curious.

In emails and proposals, use short, factual headings and subheadings, like the ones in this article.

Adding **graphs and charts** is also a smart way to break up your text. These visual aids not only keep the reader's eye engaged, but they can communicate important information much more quickly than text.

Grammatical Errors

You probably don't need us to tell you that errors in your document will make you look unprofessional. It's essential to learn grammar properly, and to avoid common mistakes that your spell checker won't find.



Here are some examples of commonly misused words:

➤ **Affect/Effect**

- "Affect" is a verb meaning to influence. (Example: the economic forecast will affect our projected income.)
- "Effect" is a noun meaning the result or outcome. (Example: what is the effect of the proposal?)

➤ **Then/Than**

- "Then" is typically an adverb indicating a sequence in time. (Example: we went to dinner, then we saw a movie.)
- "Than" is a conjunction used for comparison. (Example: the dinner was more expensive than the movie.)

➤ **Your/You're**

- "Your" is a possessive. (Example: is that your file?)
- "You're" is a contraction of "you are." (Example: you're the new manager.)
- *Note: Also watch out for other common homophones (words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings) - such as their/they're/there, to/too/two, and so on.*

➤ **Its/It's**

- "Its" is a possessive. (Example: is that its motor?)
- "It's" is a contraction of "It is." (Example: it's often that heavy.) (Yes, it is this way around!)

➤ **Company's/Companies (and Other Possessives Versus Plurals)**

- "Company's" indicates possession. (Example: the company's trucks hadn't been maintained properly.)
- "Companies" is plural. (Example: the companies in this industry are suffering.)

To learn more about commonly misused words, misused apostrophes, and other grammatical errors, take our Bite-Sized Training session on **Written Communication**.

TIP: Some of your readers – arguably an increasing number – won't be perfect at spelling and grammar. They may not notice if you make these errors. But don't use this as an excuse: there will usually be people, senior managers in particular, who will notice!

Because of this, everything you write should be of a quality that every reader will find acceptable.

Proofing

The enemy of good proofreading is speed. Many people rush through their documents, but this is how you miss mistakes. Follow these guidelines to check what you've written:

- **Proof your headers and subheaders** – People often skip these and focus on the text alone. Just because headers are big and bold doesn't mean they're error free!



- **Read the document out loud** – This forces you to go more slowly meaning that you're more likely to catch mistakes.
- **Use your finger to follow text as you read** – This is another trick that helps you slow down.
- **Start at the end of your document** – Proofread one sentence at a time, working your way from the end to the beginning. This helps you focus on errors, not on content.

Key Points

More than ever, it's important to know how to communicate your point quickly and professionally. Many people spend a lot of time writing and reading, so the better you are at this form of communication, the more successful you're likely to be.

Identify your audience before you start creating your document. And if you feel that there's too much information to include, create an outline to help organize your thoughts.

Learning grammatical and stylistic techniques will also help you write more clearly and be sure to proof the final document. Like most things, the more you write, the better you're going to be!



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