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Outlook**

**7 TIPS FOR FINE-TUNING YOUR BUSINESS WRITING
SKILLS**

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Why should you be concerned about writing? Because your clients and employers want you to be. Clients frequently judge a company's ability by its written materials. And they notice errors. A misspelled name is bad public relations. Vague phrases hinder productivity. And a condescending tone can cost you business.

With the advent of the Internet, e-mail and online services, some people have been quick to say that writing is going out of style. This couldn't be further from the truth. Computers, e-mail and fax machines have made writers out of us all. Never before has it been more important to compose clear, accurate messages – and to compose them quickly and concisely.

If your letters, e-mails or reports show signs of inaccuracy or sloppiness, how do your clients know that you're more careful with their money? If your documents aren't bold, brief and clear, what message are you conveying about your overall business philosophy?

You may feel burdened by the task of composing business letters, memos and reports, but take heart: The following tips can help you clean up your business writing in seven easy steps, without going back to English class.

1. KEEP IT SHORT AND SIMPLE

Do your readers a favor: write in short sentences and use simple words. We are wrong to believe that big words and long sentences indicate intelligence. A concise letter or report is more effective; it saves reading and writing time. Your main points won't fade into a background of unnecessary words.

Read sentences out loud to check their length. If you run out of breath, they're too long. Better yet, read your writing to someone else. If your listener forgets the beginning before you finish, you need to break your thoughts into two or more sentences.

Eliminate extra words whenever you can. For example, "it has come to our attention that your account is three months in arrears," can be edited to read: "Your account is three months past due."

2. BE SPECIFIC AND AVOID GENERALIZATIONS

Use specific, concrete words instead of vague generalizations. Don't make your readers guess about the meaning of your message; it wastes their time as well as yours. For example,

which of the following sentences conveys the most information? “Please get back to us as soon as possible regarding your return,” or: “To complete your 1040 form before the deadline, we must hear from you before April 1.”

3. USE THE ACTIVE VOICE

Avoid dead, dull-sounding writing by sticking to the active voice, in which the subject is the doer of the action. “The client filed the Schedule C” is an active sentence. “The Schedule C was filed by the client” is passive.

The passive voice makes sentences longer and more impersonal. The active voice sounds alive, personal and demanding. For example, “Your prompt attention to this letter will be appreciated” is considerably crisper in the active voice: “Please attend to this matter promptly.”

When you write, look out for the following words, which signify the passive voice:

- Is
- Is being
- Were
- Was
- Are
- Has been
- Have been
- Had been.

4. USE PARALLEL STRUCTURE

Organize your sentences with parallel structure. Your writing will be much smoother and clearer if you put related ideas in the same tense and form. For example, “I came, I saw, I conquered,” sounds a lot snappier than “I arrived, then having seen, I proceeded to conquer.”

When you’re writing a letter to a prospective client, it’s awkward to write: “Our firm offers a range of services such as assisting you in preparing financial statements. We provide computer training for you and your staff. And, we also help you with business consulting and strategic planning.” Instead, use a parallel structure to write: “Our firm offers a range of services, including:

- Financial statement preparation
- Strategic planning
- Computer training, and
- Business solutions.”

5. ORGANIZE YOUR WRITING

Always create an outline before starting to write. Even if you only jot down five or six words, it will save you writing time and remind you of where you’re headed. More importantly,

your readers won't get lost in a poorly organized document that causes them to ignore or misunderstand your message.

Get to the point immediately. Busy readers should be able to get your message in the first two or three sentences of your document. Start with the conclusion or call to action, then list your primary arguments. Provide the back-up or discussion material at the end for anyone who has time to read that far.

Once your document is written, you can visually organize your message to make it even clearer and easier to read. Use headings to group related paragraphs. Indent and space your lines to provide increased white space. Number or bullet your points.

6. WATCH YOUR TONE

The way you "talk" in writing gives your readers a mental picture of your personality. Write informally, as a friendly, concerned professional. If you sound too formal or long-winded, that's how your readers will envision you.

Use positive words and expressions instead of negative ones. If you want to motivate your readers, positive language works best. Avoid writing "you claim," which implies: "you say so, but I don't believe you." Words such as "failed to," "neglected to" or "lack of" can sound accusatory. For example, instead of: "This notice is regarding your failure to remit payment on our invoice," you might use: "Did you receive our invoice of Sept. 12, 1995?"

To keep your writing from sounding static, which can bore your readers, try alternating longer sentences with shorter ones. Also, keep in mind that cliché business phrases such as "we are in receipt of" or "attached please find" can sound pompous or stuffy.

7. EDIT FOR GRAMMAR, PUNCTUATION AND SPELLING

Spelling and grammatical errors not only convey a sloppy image, but also can cost you business. For example, a hyphen in the wrong place can inadvertently offend your readers: "We are always happy to serve small-business owners," is different than: "We are always happy to serve small business-owners."

Always let someone else edit your writing. Although most word processors have a spell check function that can catch some errors, none of them will catch words that are spelled correctly, but used incorrectly in a sentence. There's no substitute for the human eye – especially the fresh eye of a person who hasn't been looking at the same document over and over.

A number of excellent handbooks review common grammatical errors and discuss how to fix them. One of the best is William Strung, Jr. and E. B. White's classic *Elements of Style*. It's short, focused and entertaining.

Quality writing will make your life easier and more profitable. As you communicate more effectively, you will more successfully persuade others to share your point of view. Quality writing saves time, positions you as an authority and enhances self esteem. As you

increase the quantity of quality messages you send out, you're bound to experience an increase in the quantity of positive responses you receive.