

No More Gobbledegook

Write What You Mean, Quickly and with Impact

Created for the busy professional and solo-preneur, this nine-part introductory booklet is stuffed with easy expert tips designed to help you write that ad, letter, e-mail, or memo—quickly and with impact.

By Kathleen Rake

No More **Gobbledegook: Write What You Mean, Quickly and with Impact**

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Know Your Audience

**“Think like a wise man but communicate
in the language of the people.”**

William Butler Yeats

Your audience is the “who.” Your audience is any individual or group to whom you are sending a message. And your goal is to have your audience members properly informed or persuaded by receiving and understanding a particular message—exactly the way you mean them to.

Before you can properly inform or persuade people, however, you have to know a bit about them. No, you don’t have to know them personally, but you do have to know what’s generally important to them as a group and how to write to inspire them to do the following:

✓ pay attention ✓ want your stuff ✓ remain interested ✓ take appropriate action

You have to know what level of formality or familiarity is appropriate. And, you need to be sensitive to the things that confuse, bore, or offend them.

When you’re in business, you write to persuade or inform several groups of people. These groups make up your audiences. And these audiences can fall into several categories: customers, suppliers, co-workers, supervisors, employees, colleagues, and competitors.

Each audience has its own needs regarding your message’s content and delivery; in other words, you must tailor what you say in your message and how you deliver it (e-mail, post, memo, etc.) according to the audience’s particular needs and expectations.

For example, if you have to raise your prices for a very popular widget next Wednesday, you address the same issue in at least two different ways.

For your customers by letter or e-mail:

In order to continue to supply you with only the highest quality products and our superior level of customer service, we will be increasing our XYZ Widget price by just one dollar per unit, effective next Wednesday, November 7. All orders placed before Wednesday next week will be billed at the current price.

For your sales team by e-mail or memo:

Further to our meeting last month regarding the increased production and shipping costs of the XYZ Widget, we will increase this product’s price by one dollar next week, Wednesday, November 7. Please confirm that the XYZ purchasers in your territory have received the price-increase letter. As well, please be sure to reinforce the following good news with your customers: We will bill them today’s price for any orders placed before next Wednesday.

Tune Your Tone

“Language exerts hidden power, like a moon on the tides.”

Rita Mae Brown
Starting From Scratch, 1988

When you speak, your words account for just a small part of the message you convey. Body language and eye contact, as well as voice intonation, pitch, and speed all contribute to how your meaning is shaped and received.

When you write, you have only your words and their *tone* to convey your full message.

When you write a message, two people will often have completely different responses to the same words—to your tone. Tone by its nature is subjective and that’s why one person might say the tone is friendly and helpful, while another will say it is blunt and cold.

Here are three different ways of writing the same message. How would you characterize the tone?

1. You must install all materials no later than June 21.
2. It will be necessary to install all materials no later than June 21. You have been assigned to supervise installation according to the specs below.
3. Pat, the company plans to install all materials prior to June 21 and we’d like you to oversee installation. Below are some of the important specs you’ll need.

Some people characterize the first sample as demanding because they interpret *must* as an order with an implied *or else!* attached to it.

Many people say that the second sample has an impersonal sound that is still an order but is, none the less, clear.

Most of us agree that the third example is pleasant, courteous, and clear. That is because we read this message between the lines: *We’re counting on you. We have chosen you for the job because we know we can rely on you to do it right.*

Compliance or co-operation: Which do you want from your employees, staff, co-workers, customers, suppliers, and peers? Your tone can make the difference.

Here are some guidelines to help you tune your tone:

- Choose the tone that is **appropriate for the reader**. What will make the reader most comfortable? Does she prefer direct and succinct communication? Does he typically write in a personal, friendly style?

- Beware of anger, frustration, or contempt. These feelings can sabotage your writing and cause your tone to betray you. Remember that **business writing should always be professional, regardless of the topic or your feelings**. If you have doubts about your tone, hang on to your document until the next day. Or, if you don't have time to wait, show your letter to a trusted colleague and ask how he or she would characterize the tone.
- Keep in mind that pronouns such as *you* create a certain familiarity, so they can be effective tools when you have good news: ***You wrote a great report!*** But, when you have bad news and want to soften the tone, use a passive voice and eliminate the pronoun *you*: ***This report should be revised.***
- Remember that no matter how hard you try, you can't please all the people all the time with the right tone. Writing is an art, with a pinch of science thrown in (yes...some people will argue that it's the other way around), and tone is the most subjective, challenging part of writing.

Take your most recent e-mail message, memo, or letter that wasn't received the way you thought it should be and change the tone. Still a little unsure? Here are some more examples of changing tone to stimulate co-operation rather than compliance:

1. (a) We all read the report. It was well received.
(b) *You wrote a great report. Everyone loved it.*
2. (a) Don't cross the yellow line.
(b) *For your safety, please stay on this side of the yellow line.*
3. (a) Your performance review is scheduled for 1:00 p.m. sharp.
(b) *We can meet for your performance review at either 11:00 or 11:30 tomorrow morning; I am scheduling all appointments on the half hour.*

Notes

Write to Express, Not Impress; You Want to Inform or Persuade, Not Show Off

“Say all you have to say in the fewest possible words, or your reader will be sure to skip them; and in the plainest possible words or he will certainly misunderstand them.”

John Ruskin

Make it easy for people to read what you write. Don't try to impress your reader with flowery or officious writing. **Write to express, not impress.** It's important to make your writing even simpler as your subject becomes more technical or complicated.

Lose the *gobbledegook*, *bafflegab*, and *techno-talk*

Your meaning can become unclear when you use too many or needlessly big words. In most cases, it is better to write

- **use** instead of **utilize**
- **start** instead of **commence**
- **stop** instead of **cease**
- **try** instead of **endeavour**
- **when** instead of **in the event that**
- **thank you for...** instead of **this letter is to thank you for...**
- **enough** instead of **an adequate number of**

Celebrated Canadian artist and author, Emily Carr, wrote in her autobiography, *Growing Pains*, “...**get to the point as directly as you can; never use a big word if a little one will do.**” Your message will be more effective and appear less pretentious if you simply write what you mean.

How easy is it for others to read what you write? Does it surprise you that the appropriate level for most business writing is somewhere between grades eight and ten. Try the following exercise to measure your work's readability.

1. Take a passage of at least 100 words from something you've written recently
2. Add the average number of words in each sentence to the percentage of words with three or more syllables – treat the percentage as a whole number
3. Multiply the total by 0.4 and round up or down

For example:

12 Average number of words per sentence
+ 10 Percentage of big words
22 Total X 0.4 = grade nine

Adopt the YOU Attitude

“Words form the thread on which we string our experiences.”

Aldous Huxley

Make your readers the main attraction; draw them into the action.

When you write it, **make it about your readers**. When you do that, your readers will remain interested for a longer time because your document means something to them. And, because it’s relevant to your readers, because they become active and involved, there’s a better chance they will buy into your message quickly and fully.

An e-mail or memo to all employees:

Write it this way: Your new schedule’s easy-to-understand format includes all staff and corporate changes.

Not this way: Head office has developed a new schedule to inform all employees of the staff and corporate changes.

An announcement in a school’s newsletter:

Write it this way: Hey there all Newlittle School students, faculty, and staff: Your new Principal is Ms. Quitesmart. Please help us welcome her to the Somecity School District.

Not this way: The Somecity School District is pleased to announce the appointment of Ms. Quitesmart as Principal of Newlittle School.

A sales letter:

Write it this way: You’ll leave with oodles of great gifts, giggles, and memories after spending time with our friendly and fun staff!

Not this way: Our store has everything you need to complete your Christmas gift list. Our staff is friendly and fun!

Can you feel the difference when you speak directly to your reader? The changes are subtle, but they’re powerful and draw your reader right into your message—right into the action.

Notes

Active Instead of Passive Language

**“For me, words are a form of action,
capable of influencing change.”**

Ingrid Bengis

Put a little life into your writing—use the active voice! When you do, your writing becomes more direct, dramatic, and interesting. Your audience will read and absorb your entire message for two reasons:

1. They feel as though they are participating
2. Active writing (typically) uses fewer words

Passive language (the passive voice) is often easy to forget; it just doesn't stand out.

Active Voice: All the graduating students decorated the banquet hall.

Passive Voice: The banquet hall was decorated by all the graduating students.

Active Voice: Kathleen Rake delivers the workshop called, “Making the News: A Beginners’ Guide to Writing the Media Release.”

Passive Voice: The workshop called, “Making the News: A Beginners’ Guide to Writing the Media Release” is delivered by Kathleen Rake.

Active Voice: Students who leave home to attend a far-away university learn independence far more quickly than those who stay near home.

Passive Voice: Independence is learned far more quickly by students who leave home to attend a far-away university than those who stay near home.

Be Certain Before Being Funny

“A critic can only review the book he has read, not the one which the writer wrote.”

Mignon McLaughlin,
The Neurotic's Notebook, 1960

Humour should be used cautiously in business writing. Remember that humour, like tone, is subjective; what's funny to you will not be funny to someone else.

When you use humour, you risk offending the reader or creating a misunderstanding; however, if you know your reader especially well, a dash of humour can be refreshing. Just be certain that the humour is obvious as well as appropriate for the audience and the topic.

Details, Schme-tails

“My spelling is Wobbly. It's good spelling but it Wobbles, and the letters get in the wrong places.”

A.A. Milne

You need commas, semi-colons, colons, periods, hyphens, em- and en-dashes, ellipses, and exclamation, question, and quotation marks to help your readers understand what you've written. You need punctuation to help your documents become meaningful and easy-to-read communications.

Without **these** marks, your message is confusing and your audience becomes distracted and disinterested.

Use the comma, for example, to **help your readers quickly make sense of your writing**. This popular little mark keeps the different parts of the sentence from bashing into each other. This means your reader avoids confusion and maintains an easy reading rhythm.

Here are some ways to use (and to not use) the comma:

For clarity

While we were inside the tent kissing a bear ate our picnic lunch.	✘
While we were inside the tent kissing, a bear ate our picnic lunch.	✓

Contrasted elements

You must take your time on that winding road, not speed along it.	✓
Unlike his brother Alex prefers chess to team sports.	✘
Unlike his brother, Alex prefers chess to team sports.	✓

Now Check Your Spelling!

Misspelled or misused (please, please, please...beware the thesaurus) words contribute to a document that is neither professional nor credible. In addition, and most importantly, **spelling errors distract your audience from your message.** Who can afford to do that?

For effective spelling checks, **don't count on technology alone.** Instead, use the **TETE technique: Technology ▪ Eyes ▪ Time ▪ Eyes**

Here's how you do it:

- use your computer's spelling-check **technology**
- scan the document with your **eyes**
- take some **time** away from the document (sleep on it if you can)
- examine the document again—this time with a fresh pair of **eyes**

Say It Out Loud!

“The right word may be effective, but no word was ever as effective as a rightly timed pause.”

Mark Twain

If it's easy for your audience to say, it's easy for your audience to read. If it's easy for them to read, then it's likely easy for them to understand. If they understand it, you are more likely to get buy-in from them. And isn't that what you want?

If it's a tongue twister, chances are your audience won't get it right away. If they don't get it right away, they may not spend the time to get it at all—they may just go away. Plain and simple: if your audience has to read it more than once to figure it out, you need to re-write it.

Read the following sentences out loud. Does your tongue get twisted? Try re-writing the sentences so they're easy to say out loud.

1. Only our hourly rate is posted on the brochure.
2. Cindy's seashell sales were slow last Saturday.

Notes
