

Writing That Shines and Documents That Sing

The best of Business Management Daily's advice

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**Sure, you can write...
...but can you write with impact and leave behind the
mistakes others make so often?**

**In this special report, we've collected the best of
Business Management Daily's advice on writing for
real impact and then presenting it with flair.**

7 tips to strengthen your writing

Much of our workday is spent in communication with others. Make sure your writing doesn't distract readers and cancel out your efforts to communicate clearly. Here are four rules to help improve your writing:

1. Organize your thoughts to flow logically. Before your pen touches paper (or your fingers touch the keyboard), spend a few minutes thinking about the key points you want to make in your document. Ensure that you put your main point in your first statement or in the subject line of an email, rather than making the reader wade through lines of information to get to the bottom line.

2. Use plain language. Never use two or three long words when one word will do. In place of phrases like "in the event that," use a simpler word such as "if." Write the way you talk rather than writing to impress. If you were speaking, would you really say, "Mary's desk is in close proximity to mine" or "Mary's desk is too close to mine"? Aim for this kind of simplicity in your written work.

3. Write in active voice. Instead of writing, "The choice of location for the next annual meeting falls under the auspices of this committee," make it clearer by writing, "Our committee will choose the location for the next annual meeting." Unless you have some reason for obscuring who is responsible for a particular action, put that information at the beginning of a statement.

4. Forget the jargon. It's easy to fall into the habit of using important-sounding terms like synergize, impactful and mission-critical, but they don't really mean anything. Stick with legitimate, clear words that get your point across.

5. Use fewer words. Beginning writers often think that using a lot of words makes them sound knowledgeable, but it really just obscures what they're trying to communicate. For example, "despite the fact that" can simply be changed to "although."

6. Use more contractions. Many business writers make their documents sound unnecessarily formal by refusing to use contractions. Adopting a less formal tone will make your document a little easier for the reader to follow. Try using lots of contractions in the first draft of your documents and see how it sounds. If the tone seems a little too casual, change some of the contractions back to their complete form.

7. Break the rules once in a while. Following all the rules religiously will give you 100% correct writing, but it will probably kill your voice—the little verbal quirks that make your writing sound like you. Don't get sloppy, but if something just doesn't sound right when you write it, consider bending a rule to make your writing sound more authentic.



Microsoft Word: Get the picture?

Diagrams, pictures, charts and graphs can clarify your message, support your case and help visual learners to understand the information. Here is how to get them in there, make them look crisp and clear, and get them to stay put.

Inserting images 101

To get a picture into your document, on the Insert tab, in the Illustrations group, click the type of graphic you'd like to add. The hardest part of this process is to let go of where you'd ultimately like to see it, how big or small it should be, and how it should behave with the other content in your document. Just get it in there. Once you do, you will see dots around the image, which will allow you to resize it. Handle carefully!

Tips for success

If you take a smaller image and stretch it out with the handles, it's the same as stretching stretchy fabric. It thins out and becomes less opaque. That might be OK with stockings, but not so much with your photos. Stretching it out will make it look fuzzy and out of focus. Use the largest, highest-quality image you can get and size it down to avoid diminishing the appearance of your image in the document.

Positioning and wrapping

You will also see an upside-down horseshoe symbol on the side of the image you've inserted. This is the Layout Options button. It is the decisions you will make on the Layout Options button that will determine how your image behaves with text, whether it moves with text or occupies a fixed position on the page. The default is In Line with Text. Here's what each option means and how they affect the way your documents appear in both Word desktop apps and Word online.

In Line with Text: If you imagine that the first character of a word wasn't a letter, but a picture, you'll understand how this one works. Wherever this picture is inserted, it becomes part of the text it is in front of or behind, depending on where your cursor was. As you drag it, you'll notice it doesn't seem to come with you, but your cursor appears to move. It is marking the position where you want to move it. This option causes the image to behave the same in both the desktop and online versions of Word.

Text Wrapping: All text-wrapping options also come with the options to have the image move with the text or be in a fixed position on the page. The default is that it moves with the text. This is where it gets a little messy between the desktop and online versions. Notice the white space in the rightmost split image? That's the online version of the same document you're looking at on the left presented in the desktop version.

Tips for success

If your document may be viewed in either app, Word desktop or Word online, it is best to use In Line with Text with a new paragraph both before and after the image. Work with the Show/Hide button on to see the position of paragraph markers (¶). The button looks like a paragraph marker and is located in the Paragraph group on the Home tab. Right, left and center alignment will all work as expected in both versions now.

Neither text boxes nor tables with images inserted will get you around these issues. That said, if you want to insert multiple images side by side, a table makes it easy. Just remove the borders. While you will still see a thin gray line in the desktop app, the borders will be invisible in the online app.

MS Word tip: Paste problems

Collaboration is great! But, you may end up with 10 documents to combine into one, while everyone has approached formatting differently. One way to handle this is to copy and paste all content into one document and follow the steps explained above (under “Formatting Disagreement”). Another is a bit more surgical. When you copy and paste text from one document to another, you will see a pop-up control options box. Select the capital A. That just pastes the text, which inherits the surrounding formatting.



Keep it simple

Turn business-speak into plain English by keeping your writing simple and to the point. *Examples:*

Instead of:

Use:

activate

begin

advise

tell

along the lines of

like

cancel out

cancel

demonstrate

show

discontinue

stop

enclosed herein

enclosed

for the purpose of

for

in order to

to

in the course of	during
in the event of	if
in the near future	soon
it has been brought to our attention	we have learned
this point in time	now

Add a sucker punch to your writing

One good way to really wake up your reader, no matter how dry the topic of your document, is to very occasionally drop a paragraph consisting of a single sentence between two larger bodies of text. It can provide a dramatic jolt and create a quick, laser-like focus on the topic of that sentence.

Use a Focus Sheet for a better writer's checklist

Whether penning an e-mail update for your manager, an all-staff memo or a letter of complaint to a vendor, you are striking up a relationship.

For your message to come across well, it helps to consider both sides of the relationship: What exactly do *you* want out of it, and how will the other person likely respond?

“The more you consider your reader, the better your chances of getting the response you desire,” says Deborah Dumaine, author of *Write to the Top*.

Dumaine recommends that before you write, plan your document by running through the questions on this Focus Sheet:

1. Purpose

- Why am I writing this?
- What do I want the reader to do?

2. Audience

- Who exactly is my reader?
- What does the reader know about the subject?
- How will the reader react to my main message: Receptive? Indifferent? Resistant?
- What's in it for the reader?

3. Bottom Line

- If the reader were to forget everything else, what one main message do I want him or her to remember?
- So what? What is the impact of my bottom line?

4. Strategy

- Should my message be a document? Or would a phone call be more effective?
- Timing: Am I too early? Or too late to send it at all?
- Distribution list: Is it trimmed to the minimum?
- Is someone else communicating the same information? Should I check?

Now let's take a closer look at each of the sections.

Purpose: Some typical reasons for writing are to persuade, to request, to propose, to motivate, to explain or to respond. You'll notice that "to inform" didn't make the cut. That's because most of your writing is actually meant to do something besides inform.

Example: Are you writing to inform your manager about your progress on project ABC? Maybe. But your primary purpose may actually be to flaunt your capabilities.

Audience: Nailing down who your audience is should determine how technical you can be, and whether you should soft-pedal or be assertive in making a request.

Bottom line: "The sooner you can boil it down to one or two sentences, the easier it will be to write," Dumaine says.

Example: If you're announcing that you're holding a meeting, the bottom line is probably not, "I'm holding a meeting." It's more likely, "This meeting is critical right now because ___."

Strategy: Timing is very important. So much communication is wasted energy, because it arrives too late for action. And trimming your distribution list ensures your message gets read; people begin ignoring messages if they're cc'd indiscriminately.

Will you complete the Focus Sheet every time you dash off an e-mail? Probably not. But go through the exercise a few times to train your brain. It keeps your writing on track.

MS Word tip: Formatting disagreement

Ever receive content so you can “make it pretty” or “clean it up?” What you received may be a heavily, but not necessarily coherently, formatted document. Here are two tips. If Styles have been used and just haphazardly changed, select everything (Ctrl+A), then press Ctrl+Spacebar. This returns everything to the default formatting for that style. A more “scorched earth” approach is to use the Clear Formatting button on the Home tab. This sets it all to Normal style. From here, you can start over with Styles.

Make your writing more assertive

Sometimes we lose sight of the fact that assertiveness is not limited to situations where we communicate face-to-face. Come across with greater confidence by:

Using energetic, engaging language. Your emails and notes are competing with everyone else's, so you need “attention grabbers”—just as much as any professional writer does. When you're trying to make an important point, don't be afraid to spice up your verbs and adjectives, create paragraph breaks for effect or lead off with a bold statement. Bullet-point anything that might come across as a list and choose both your greeting and end salutation carefully.

Use your tech tools to highlight key passages. Underline the things you want to stress, precede them with an arrow or other interesting graphics, or set them in a different or larger font than the rest of your text.

Have a well-organized presentation of ideas. State your main point up front, followed by supporting data or ideas. Your document will read smoothly and you won't force readers to go through intellectual aerobics to get your message.

Trim the fat. Use as few words as possible. The shorter the message, the more powerful. Call it the "Gettysburg Address" rule.

Make concrete suggestions for improvement and progress. Ask yourself, What did I solve in this email? If you're making a suggestion, pretend like it's the only viable option and defend it well. Try to position your email as the last word on the subject. State clearly what steps should be taken and what deadlines should be put in place.

Don't dilute your original message. You should avoid using the word "basically" as a crutch. If something is a fact, state it as such. If something is your opinion, a simple "I feel" or "I am convinced" will be more effective in expressing your emotions than a long, flowery phrase.



Essential skills for big documents

Most large documents are fragile and unwieldy because they have no bones. Wait! Weren't we talking about documents? What we mean is that by using certain structural elements, formatting can be durable with multiple contributors, easy to navigate and easy to read. Possibly the most important thing is the order in which you do things.

The order

1. Outline using Heading Styles for major topics and subtopics.
2. Fill in the text content under each major topic and subtopic.

3. Insert any graphics or tables needed, positioned roughly (not exactly) where you want them.
4. Turn on Track Changes (or rely on versions to track them automatically).
5. Send around for revision and to obtain additional content from other contributors.
6. Clear any undesirable formatting (Ctrl+Spacebar).
7. Fine-tune graphic/table positioning.
8. Apply captions, if they will be needed, to tables and graphics.
9. Insert tables of contents and figures where needed.
10. Adjust paragraph flow.
11. Insert cover page.
12. Insert section breaks, if needed.
13. Unlink headers and/or footers between sections.
14. Adjust header and footer information, such as page numbers, as needed.
15. Update table of contents and figures before printing.

Heading styles

By applying styles, you give your document structure and make it easy to navigate. To see this work, turn on the Navigation Pane. On the View tab, in the Show group, check the Navigation Pane checkbox. Now, outline your document. For each major heading, apply Heading 1 style; and for subtopics, Heading 2, Heading 3 and so on. The structure will also begin to appear on the left in the Navigation pane. And it will stay that way even as you begin to fill in the text content and graphics.

After revisions by other contributors, you may notice some “creativity” with formatting. If the Navigation Pane still shows the correct outline, all you need to do is select all the text and use the Ctrl+Spacebar shortcut to return all text to the original style formatting. If necessary, reapply heading styles where they have

been removed. Detect changes by comparing versions or navigating changes through the Track Changes feature.

References

After you have positioned your graphics and tables more precisely, you may have decided to create captions and/or a table of figures. On the References tab, with a graphic selected, choose Insert Caption from the Captions group. You'll be shown a dialog box that will give you some choices as to how those captions will be numbered and formatted. Even if you insert additional graphics, by using this tool, numbering will be adjusted to keep it sequential. Depending upon the requirements of your deliverable, you may insert a table of figures either at the beginning or end of the document. In that same Captions group, use the Insert Table of Figures button to put it where it belongs. On the left of the References ribbon, you'll also notice the Table of Contents button. Place this in the beginning of the document.



Whoa, whoa ... easy on those commas!

Commas are intended to help the reader comprehend a sentence more easily. Unnecessary ones are a distraction. Here are three places not to put a comma, from Barron's *Essentials of English*:

1. Do not interrupt the normal flow of thought with a comma.

Faulty: The fact that the train had broken down halfway between its point of departure and its destination, was sufficient reason for the passengers to malign the railroad on social media. (Though the subject is a long clause, it is entirely clear. It opens the sentence as expected, and it is followed immediately by the verb. Inserting a comma after *destination* merely impedes the flow of thought.)

Faulty: The carpenter insisted, that he knew what he was doing. (The comma after *insisted* separates the verb from its object.)

Faulty: He drove a hard, sharp, painful, bargain. (The comma after *painful* separates the adjective *painful* from the word it modifies.)

2. Do not separate words or phrases joined by *and* or *or*.

Faulty: He went to the office, and opened his mail. (And joins the compound verb went and opened. It does not join two clauses.)

3. Do not place a comma between a conjunction and the word or words it introduces.

Faulty: He was tired but, he refused to stop driving.

Faulty: The little girl continued to hope that, her lost cat would soon be found.

A little slang can pep up almost anything

You wouldn't want to use it as a style guide, or for almost any business-to-business correspondence, but getting familiar with some of the lingo found in the Urban Dictionary can help you add some modern flair to a routine document or presentation. Dropping terms like "phoneslinger," "hate hug," or "textretary" can be a real (and perhaps educational) wake-up.

5 tips to make your e-newsletter speak loud and proud

"With statistics like these, how are you going to compel people to read your newsletter?"

The daunting numbers Julie Perrine of All Things Admin spoke of in her April webinar are these: The average email user spends 51 seconds reading each e-letter they get; that is, if that person is even among the 15 to 30 percent who open them. And yet e-letters are simply too valuable a business tool to do without, a thrifty touchpoint with your audience that can provide *you* with as much information as it offers *them*.

Julie packed her session with tip after tip for fashioning messages that generate more and more readers. One theme she kept coming back to says a lot about where technology is today compared to just a few years ago—and why you need to shift your e-letter strategy right now or watch your open rates decline fast.

Here are five techniques to keep in mind when launching an electronic ‘zine to grab them by the lapels and bring in their business (or just their undivided attention). They apply whether you’re blasting to 50,000 people or just that strange department on the floor beneath you:

1. Bow down to mobile. It’s still a mental readjustment for most to imagine that their e-letters are so often being read on cellphones. Make that adjustment right now, Julie advised, and design for it. Go with a single column format when you can, and consider loading as much of your content as possible into the body of the e-letter itself—without demanding lots of link-clicking that challenges spotty cell reception and data plans. And make sure to test your email on as many devices as possible to note how it displays on each. “30 percent of people who have a bad mobile experience go to a competitor’s website,” Julie revealed.

A subtle but key tech hint to consider is what text will first appear in a user’s inbox, especially on those mobile devices. Make the very first line below your masthead or banner something intriguing rather than having their message preview display something like today’s date or “Can’t read this email? Click here to view it on the Web.”

2. Pick a frequency and do not slip. The goal is to create expectation and anticipation so that Monday afternoons always mean a little bonus in their inbox, or the first of the month brings them good news. Random blasts erode the audience’s confidence in you, as do delays in getting them what they’ve come to expect.

3. Test subject lines out on ... you. Ask yourself, “Would *I* open this?” Trotting out the same subject line every month or getting too conservative puts you at the mercy of all the other emails bombarding your subscribers’ inboxes. Pose a question, create a mystery, issue a command. The subject line’s length is never quite as important as its content, but a soft limit of 50 characters is good to shoot

for. Be careful not to make those characters spell out words that ever-evolving spam filters watch for.

4. Get personal. You've sent them a pretty email, but they may be thinking, "Who *are* these people?" Your e-letter can speak as some company going through the motions of the communications race, or it can possess the voice of a real human being taking a genuine interest in the recipient. "Break through the façade and offer a face," Julie advised; her own e-letter begins with a note directly from her every time.

5. Remember to heal their pain. "Pain points," that is. When an attendee asked during the Q & A session how to sell a product in an e-letter without coming off too aggressively, Julie reminded us that as long as each issue directly addresses readers' daily struggles and provides a real, free solution or two, they'll take a post-wisdom sales pitch in stride.

Is it even realistic to forgo these digital shouts if the means to make them is so prevalent and available? It doesn't seem so when you consider the benefits. Keeping an open line between you and those you need to reach is mandatory in this era of social media and readers who crave giving instant feedback. And even a basic level of service (Mail Chimp and Constant Contact were just two of the providers Julie mentioned) will give you those most magical tools: open and click rates. They'll tell you which content users are reading, which subject lines are working, where their eyes are going. Print can't deliver those metrics.

If you're at all on the fence about whether you want to produce an e-letter, consider one last benefit Julie mentioned: your personal return on investment. Getting an e-letter up and running is like putting an assortment of work skills into a blender and making yourself a healthy résumé shake. You'll learn intensely about writing, editing, marketing, HTML, design, list-building, email collection and even the laws that protect us from spam. So go ahead and be a little selfish with your plan to start creating ... as long as you remember to test *all* your links before clicking Send.

Creating bookmarks in Word

Microsoft Word has the ability to create bookmarks (essentially metatags) with any selection of text or objects. This really comes in handy when you have a citation in mind, but not the citation data yet. For example if you want to quote Stephen Covey and know the quote, but not the reference, you can create a bookmark and navigate to it later. Once your text is selected, click the Bookmark button (Insert tab, Links group). Give it a name and click Add. Now, from the Go To dialog (Ctrl+G), you will be able to conveniently locate any bookmarked text that you created.

Make electronic thank-yous memorable

Sending an electronic thank-you note is never quite as classy as a paper note or card, but there's one way to make your gratitude stand out: Create a memorable subject line that'll pop up impressively in their inbox. Instead of just "Thank you for your gift" or "We appreciate you going the extra mile," which sound computer-generated, try something like "Wow, did we dream that project or did you actually make it happen?" or "Help, we can't stop telling our friends about what was in that box!"



Clean up your sentences with parallelism

Parallelism is the care given to balance words with other words to make yourself clear. For example, items in a list should be parallel. Check out this list, and spot the problem:

The steps of making a movie are:

- *Write a script.*
- *Finding a producer.*
- *To hire a director.*
- *Getting funding.*
- *Roll cameras!*

The verbs in this list are all over the place, making the list jarring. Applying parallelism makes the list read more smoothly:

- ***Write*** a script.
- ***Find*** a producer.
- ***Hire*** a director.
- ***Get*** funding.
- ***Roll*** cameras!

Or how about this sentence:

You seem to have more interest in the Coldplay concert than raking the yard.

Applying parallelism, we get this improved version:

*You seem to have more interest **in going** to the Coldplay concert than **in raking** the yard.*

One more example:

You can impress your boss by saving the company money or dedication to excellence.

Better:

*You can impress your boss by **saving** the company money or **dedicating** yourself to excellence.*

Notice how parallelism brings consistent grammatical construction to each part of these sentences, making them friendlier to the ear.

Did you know that Word can translate your documents for you?

If you receive a document in another language, on the Review tab in the Language group, look for the Translate button. You can either choose Translate Document or Translate Selection. The Translator task pane will appear on the right and allows you to choose a From language and a To language. It will also translate in real time while you type if you keep the pane open. Use the Translator only for better understanding. To produce a translation that supports a legal agreement, always use a professional translator.

The war against capital letters

The internet predictably lost its mind recently when it was revealed that lecturers at Leeds Trinity University had been cautioned not to overuse capital letters when issuing assignments. Students were sometimes intimidated by all-caps messages, the university claimed, as they were when they encountered the word ‘don’t’ and other negative terms.

“Despite our best attempts to explain assessment tasks, any lack of clarity can generate anxiety and even discourage students from attempting the assessment at all,” a memo said.

The university said its guidance was based on research into best practices in teaching.

Professor Margaret A House OBE, vice-chancellor at Leeds Trinity University, told Mirror Online that “it is also about good communication and consistent style. For example, it is best practice not to write in all capital letters regardless of the sector.”

While some have perceived the university’s guidance as a weak concession to the overly sensitive, there’s likely some good communication advice in it:

- 1. Drop all-caps in your emails and office signs.** Even those who shrug off the aggressive use of all-caps often perceive it as clunky and a little obnoxious.
- 2. Frame instructions positively.** A list of don’ts comes off as hostile and ungrateful. Try a gentler way to get people to comply.

MS Word tip: Changing styles easily

If you’ve ever lived through a branding change, you know the heartache of having to change pages and pages of content to reflect new colors and fonts. If you use Styles, this change is a breeze. Simply change one occurrence of the style—for example, a Heading 1. Then, on the Home tab in the Styles gallery, locate the style and right-click the tile. Then choose Update <style name> to match the selection. Every occurrence of that style will now reflect your new fonts and colors.

5 tips for writing ‘power’ headlines

Whether you’re writing a report, a presentation or a newsletter story, your headlines can make or break your document. Here’s how to remedy even the worst headlines:

1. Be specific. Replace a broad headline with a concrete one.

Broad: "Background information"

Better: "Our role in the wireless revolution"

2. Include your point. Give more information, not less.

Broad: "Improvements"

Better: "Recommendation: ways to improve employee training"

3. Emphasize action with verbs in the active voice.

Broad: "Step 1"

Better: "Hold a kickoff meeting"

4. Be positive. People are drawn to good news.

Negative: "Problem: absenteeism in the workplace"

Better: "Opportunity: Increase productivity by reducing absenteeism"

5. Ask questions that will appeal to your readers.

Broad: "Timetable"

Better: "When can you expect the results?"

—Adapted from *Write to the Top: Writing for Corporate Success*, Deborah Dumaine, Random House.