Guide to Better Business Writing
2nd Edition
Does writing for an audience of senior managers or key stakeholders get your heart pounding—in a bad way? Do you stare at your blank computer screen for several painful minutes, type a few words, delete them, type a few more, delete again, and then go refill your coffee? When you send e-mails to colleagues, do your messages disappear into a void, never to be read, let alone answered? Do your proposals fail to grab clients’ attention and win jobs?

Many of us fumble for the right words and tone when we write, even if we’re confident and articulate when we speak. But it doesn’t have to be that way. Writing clearly and persuasively requires neither magic nor luck. And it’s not a genetic gift. It’s a skill, to be sure—but one you can build with the help of the practical advice in this guide.

YOU’LL LEARN HOW TO:

- Push past writer’s block
- Organize your ideas
- Cut to the chase—and keep readers’ attention
- Trim the fat from your documents
- Strike the right tone
- Create proposals that win business
- Write e-mails that get people to act
- Call out key points with formatting
- Avoid grammar gaffes
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Write Quickly—*Then edit*

by John Clayton

When you sit down to write a business document, do the words come too slowly? As you flesh out the first draft of a report, do you continually backtrack to fix grammar and spelling? Does your search for better phrasing stop your thinking in its tracks? Does your belief that each sentence must be perfect before you can go on to the next make writing a slow, torturous process?

Writing that never gains momentum is a common problem. But the problem does have a solution.

Peter Elbow, the author of *Writing with Power*, believes that writing in any format involves an inherent conflict. He distinguishes between the *productive* instinct and the *editorial* instinct, noting that writing requires both.

For example, you may find it easy to explain your product manufacturing process in spoken language because all you’re doing is producing words. When it comes to writing down that same explanation, though, you may become frustrated. Writing has many more rules than speaking does, and the editorial instinct demands that you think about those rules while you’re trying to produce the right words.

Elbow says the early part of the writing process should be like brainstorming: fast and uncritical. Rather than pausing to reject or refine an idea, simply jot it down and move on. Perhaps you will build on that idea, or perhaps you will go in another direction. Most people are comfortable with brainstorming exercises because everyone understands that later you will go back to examine the ideas more critically, discarding some, refining others. Why not do the same thing with writing? As you draft your discussion of a competitor’s strengths and weaknesses, write down everything that comes to mind. The draft may be long-winded or may run off on tangents; it may even be full of grammatical errors. But rather than interfering with your thought processes as you set down the ideas, wait until you revise to fix anything.

The following principles will help you hone your productive instinct for writing, hone your editorial instinct for
revising, and, most important, keep the two processes separate.
When Writing...

**Write your first draft quickly.** Set a goal of writing a first draft faster than you ever have before. For example, give yourself just 20 minutes to complete a two-page document— if necessary, make the deadline real by starting to write 20 minutes before a staff meeting. You know this draft won’t be perfect; indeed, that’s the point. You’ll fix the inaccuracies later, in another 20-minute burst after the meeting. For now the point is to set a goal that will force you to produce lots of material quickly, suppressing the instinct to make the first go-round perfect.

**Highlight problems, but don’t fix them.** As you write, if you can’t think of a word, just use “XXX.” Or think of a word that’s close, and underline it, but move on. If you write a sentence you don’t really like, underline it or put it in a different color. But don’t try to fix it right away! Keep going: Write the next sentence while the juices are flowing. After you’re done, you can go back and fix all those passages you’ve flagged. Now that you’re writing faster, you’ll have so much extra time that fixing problems will be easy even if you’ve underlined practically the entire document.

**Turn off your spell-checker.** Your word-processing software should be a tool to help you write, not an instant critic. While you’re composing, turn off those features that slow down the production process. You’ll have to turn them back on later—but again, it’s quicker, easier, and more productive to change dozens of misspellings at once than to continually interrupt yourself while composing.
When Revising…

**Turn the spell-checker back on.** Writing a fast draft works only if you go back and fix it later. Spell-checking is one way computers have made life easier. They can’t help you write; they don’t understand your business. But they can help you edit. Let the spell-checker do its thing—at the appropriate stage of the process.

**Search for common mistakes.** Too often, when “revising” a document, you probably just read through it and fix whatever happens to pop up. Instead, actively look for potential problems. For example, if you commonly confuse “affect” and “effect,” search for each one. Or if you commonly type “manger” instead of “manager” (a hard-to-catch mistake because the spell-checker knows that “manger” is a word), do a global search-and-replace.

Develop a list of weaknesses in your writing, seek them out, and perform a revision for each one. If your writing suffers from too much passive voice, for instance, search your entire document for “is,” “are,” and “were.”

**“Hire” a proofreader.** There may be someone in a nearby office to whom language comes easily. Can you get him or her to read your draft and look especially for the problems you tend to struggle with?

**Change the way you interact with the document.** If no such editor is available, you can be that editor yourself. But since you are now playing a different role, you may want to look at the physical document differently. For example, you could print it out and edit with pen on paper—where you’re more likely to catch errors.

**Read it aloud.** The best way to catch language errors in a document is to read it aloud. As you do so, you may stumble in certain spots—a sign that these spots may need rewriting. Reading aloud also forces you to slow down and look at each word, which allows you to catch mistakes—such as missing words—and discrepancies you might otherwise gloss over.

When you separate the tasks of writing and editing, and work on each one, they should feed each other. As you develop
confidence that you can fix mistakes easily and quickly, you’ll gain the trust in yourself to ignore the editorial impulse while composing. As you write more quickly, you’ll feel more productive, and you might even lose some of your dread of revising.

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Win Over Readers by Meeting Their Needs

by Holly Weeks

Business readers are content driven, time pressed, and in search of solutions. What does that mean to you as a writer? First, stop trying to impress people with words. In business, good language isn’t fancy; it’s useful. It simply conveys information and ideas without calling attention to itself. Second, highlight key points at the top of your document—and organize and present the body text logically. Otherwise, your audience won’t be able to follow your train of thought. If you’re confusing people, you’re not persuading them.
The Starting Point

Business readers will judge from your introduction whether the rest of your message or report is worth their time. So begin by making it clear why they should read it. Establish the relevance and utility of the document as a whole. As Barbara Minto explains in *The Minto Pyramid Principle: Logic in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving*, an effective introduction briskly tells a story built around four elements:

1. **The situation.** A quick, factual sketch of the current business situation that serves to anchor the reader.

2. **The complication.** A problem that unsettles the situation in the story you’re telling. It’s why you’re writing the message or report.

3. **The question.** This might be “What should we do?” “How can we do it?” or “What’s wrong with what we tried?” The question may be implied rather than spelled out.

4. **The answer.** Your response to the question and your solution to the complication.
Reader-Friendly Style

“Flowing” sentences tend to be long, dense, and rhythmic. Like soothing lullabies, they’ll put your business readers to sleep. Choppy sentences are no better; they’re abrupt and distracting. Readers want the middle ground—brisk, hardworking sentences that carry useful content. They also want clarity. Complex phrasing doesn’t make you look smarter; it makes you look pompous and self-absorbed.

Surprisingly, jargon—the specialized language of a particular field—is not inimical to good business writing if it’s suited to your primary audience. It provides a tight and efficient way to communicate among experts. Avoid it, though, when your readers will have to work hard to understand it. If you have multiple audiences and you want to use professional terminology because your primary audience uses it, define the term the first time it appears. For a long report, consider adding a glossary.

The order in which the elements appear can vary. Here’s an example of an introduction that presents the situation, the complication, and then the solution. The question (“What should we do?”) is implied.

Mediation’s popularity has increased over the last quarter-century as people have sought alternative methods of dispute resolution that do not entail litigation’s high cost and adversarial approach. But because mediators possess varying levels of training, the quality of mediation is unpredictable. I suggest that we use our organization’s stature to spearhead a movement to professionalize the standards of practice so that mediators can get consistent, high-quality preparation in every state, and individuals or communities submitting to mediation will have confidence in their mediators’ qualifications.

Here’s another way you can write the introduction:
What can we do to professionalize mediation so that the momentum gained over the last quarter-century is not lost? Individuals and communities turned to mediation in the first place to avoid the expense and conflict of litigation. But mediators’ varying levels of training make quality unpredictable, which causes dissatisfaction. I suggest that we use our organization’s stature to spearhead a movement to establish standards of practice so that mediators can get high-quality training wherever they live, and individuals or communities submitting to mediation will have confidence in their mediators’ qualifications.

Notice that the different order of elements (question, situation, complication, solution) still satisfies the reader’s expectations for the introduction. But it changes the tone. The second intro sounds more assertive.
The Argument

Now it’s time to make the case for the solution you advocate. Minto has two recommendations. First, before you start putting sentences together, diagram your argument and data as small blocks of information. Second, working from the top down, build a pyramid with those blocks. The information at the bottom should develop and support the points above. (See the chart “Organizing Ideas in a Pyramid.”) Your thinking may have progressed from the bottom up in the pyramid, but your writing should progress from the top down.

Organizing Ideas in a Pyramid

From The Minto Pyramid Principles: Logic in Writing, Thinking and Problem Solving, by Barbara Minto. © 1996 by Barbara Minto.

Say you have just joined a midsize processed-food company. As the new vice president of business development, you are charged with identifying new markets and leading the creation of products for them.

Sales growth in the company’s main product line, frozen dinners, has been stagnant for three years running. But you have identified a promising new target market: working parents ages 35 to 55 who have sophisticated tastes and avoid preservatives and artificial ingredients. You want to persuade your company’s executive committee to create an up-market line of organic frozen dinners with a Continental flair.
You could organize the blocks in one section of your pyramid like this:

Create a high-end line of organic gourmet frozen dinners

Why?
- Sales in our main product line are flat
- To grow, we need to target a new market
- Double-income parents ages 35-55 constitute a large and growing market that would respond to this product line

Why?
- They have sophisticated tastes and the income to indulge them
- They are too busy to cook from scratch every night
- Most frozen dinners contain additives and preservatives that these customers don’t want to consume themselves and that they especially don’t want their children to consume

Once you’ve arranged the pieces of your argument in this way, the writing becomes much easier.
Other Tips

- **Follow principles, not templates.** The principles of good business writing—fast, focused openings; key points at the top of each section; just enough detail—will serve you better than twisting your content to fit a generic template.

- **Lead with your key points.** You’re not writing a murder mystery. Business readers want clarity, not suspense.

- **Be concise but complete.** Many overwriters pride themselves on their thoroughness, and underwriters congratulate themselves for being admirably brief. Both do a disservice to their readers and to themselves. Overwriters risk losing readers in a flood of detail, and underwriters may come across as superficial thinkers.

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Sell Your Proposal with a Strong Executive Summary

by John Clayton

Responding to a request for proposals (RFP) is pretty straightforward. You describe your company’s history, your product or service, its implementation schedule, and the support you’ll provide. The one stumbling block is the one section that everyone will read: the executive summary.

What is its purpose? If you answer, “To summarize the proposal,” think again. The executive summary lays out the business case. As you write it, you should balance efficient delivery of key information with a persuasive, well-substantiated pitch. Above all, the executive summary must demonstrate a clear understanding of the potential client’s needs. A good way to do this is to include the ROI your services will deliver. “You need to describe outcomes,” says Tom Sant, author of *Persuasive Business Proposals: Writing to Win Customers, Clients, and Contracts*. “Describe the impact on performance—ideally a measurable impact.”
Know Your Audience

When crafting an executive summary, you’re writing for busy executives interested in bottom-line deliverables—so don’t bog it down with details. “An executive reads [a proposal] for certain keywords,” says Stacia Kelly, president of CatKlaw, a Virginia-based writing boutique. “If he likes it, he’ll hand it to an assistant and ask them to read the whole thing.”

For that reason, advises Bud Porter-Roth, author of Proposal Development: How to Respond and Win the Bid, put the most critical information in the first couple of paragraphs. “The executive may not read any more,” he says. But, he cautions, “the RFP writers will read the whole thing.” Thus the executive summary has an additional, secondary audience: the middle managers who will make presentations about you and your proposal to senior management. So make sure the executive summary gives them the tools to act on your behalf. To reach both audiences, it should do three things:
An Executive Summary That Worked

When the editor and the art director of Harvard Business Review searched for the right partner to redesign the magazine for its 2010 relaunch, they received many proposals that failed to distinguish themselves. Most talked about the service providers and their design philosophies but neglected to highlight how hiring the vendors would benefit the magazine. One proposal quickly rose to the top of the pile—and eventually won the job—largely by making it clear up front how the design firm, the Australia-based de Luxe & Associates, would help the magazine better meet the needs of its evolving audience.

Here’s an edited excerpt from the executive summary of that winning proposal.

To meet the needs of readers, staff members, and advertisers, the new HBR will deliver:

- A new capacity to build relationships with readers.
- An energy and excitement from providing content that’s more insightful and more useful to readers.
- The ability to harness print and online media’s unique strengths, tying the two into a more compelling brand experience.

We will allow the magazine to remain sophisticated, but make the experience of reading it a simple, delightful, and intuitive process. By helping to define what we expect readers to do with the magazine, we can devise design and editorial techniques to improve its timeliness and “must-read-now” nature as well as building on its function as an “investment for reference.”

By dovetailing with HBR online, we can make the overall brand experience of HBR like spending time with a constant
companion and wise adviser. We’ll look closely at the pace, editing, and intensity of the magazine’s pages to find ways of increasing readers’ engagement.

A successful redesign will clear a pathway to deliver HBR’s value to readers and draw the best work from contributors. The new product will provide a more cohesive editorial structure, stopping points for readers, and meaningful “bite-sized” pieces of content throughout to make it easier for readers to find what they’re looking for.

The HBR project is squarely within our specialty as a company. Our core business is designing new publications and redesigning established titles. This experience allows us to contribute valuable analysis, training, and advice to our clients.

1. Establish the need or problem. This might be more challenging than it first appears. Often, says Porter-Roth, “RFPs are poorly written. You may have to define the business issues, because the RFP was written by technical people who saw only technical issues.”

   Sant adds: “You need to convince them that this is a problem worth doing something about. Your biggest competitor may be that they do nothing, that they spend this money on something else.”

2. Recommend the solution and explain its value. “Be sure to make a firm, clear recommendation,” advises Sant. For example: We recommend that integrated content management software be implemented across the company. Then explain its benefits in business terms, not just technical terms.

   “You need to say things like ‘This solution will reduce your work staff by five people’ or ‘This CRM will allow you to answer questions while online, rather than in a call back,’” says Porter-Roth.

3. Differentiate your company. Give the key reasons why your company is the right one to deliver the solution. Highlight a unique methodology, for instance, or provide a quick case study of your past work. Another idea: Include testimonials from satisfied clients. Just don’t get carried away and steal the focus from the potential client. “It’s not about the vendor—it’s about the customer,” says Sant.
His rule of thumb: Make sure the executive summary mentions the customer’s name three times as often as your company’s name.

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Adapted from Harvard Management Communication Letter (product #C0308E), August 2003.
Other Tips

• Use formatting to highlight your message. Bullets and headings will make the executive summary easier to skim.

• Keep it clear, clean, and to the point. Strike out unnecessary jargon, and proofread carefully. While you’re in editing mode, make sure your executive summary stays true to its name. “Keep your executive summary short—one to two pages for the first 25 pages of proposal text and an additional page for each 50 pages thereafter,” says Sant.

• Take advantage of technology. If you deliver your proposal electronically, Kelly says, embed links for your readers: “Make it easy for them to click to more information later in the document.”

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Make Your Proposal Come Out on Top

by Nick Wreden

Nancy Sucher doesn’t just read proposals. She looks for the start of a relationship—a partner who recognizes her needs and will speak to her clearly.

A procurement negotiation manager at Boise Office Solutions in Illinois, Sucher likes proposals that follow the RFP (request for proposal) instructions precisely. Those that veer from that path create more work for her and her staff, and they also raise a red flag. “If [vendors] don’t listen to us—the customer—now, will they listen to us later?” she asks.
Seven Questions for a Client-Centered Proposal

“Before your fingertips caress a single key,” proposal consultant Tom Sant writes, “you should answer the following seven questions. They’ll force you to develop a client-centered perspective.”

1. What is the client’s problem or need? Whether the client has issued a specific request or you’re proactively offering a solution, don’t confuse what you can do with what the client can get out of it.

2. What makes this problem worth solving? Evaluate the situation carefully. What makes it something that can’t be ignored, and why is now the right time to act?

3. What goals must be served? Before you propose anything, make sure you understand the standards by which the client judges success. What is the company trying to accomplish? What is it trying to avoid?

4. Which goal has the highest priority? After you’ve established the client’s desired outcomes, determine which ones matter most. Then, in your proposal, present them in that order—from greatest to least importance—establishing that you understand how the company thinks.

5. What products/applications/services can I offer that will solve the problem or meet the need? Typically, problems can be solved in several ways. Look at all the possibilities. The more creative you are in combining what you have to offer with what you know about the client’s needs, the more likely you’ll be to distinguish your offer from the rest of the pack.
6. What results are likely to follow from each potential recommendation? Make an educated guess, basing it on your prior experiences. Will your recommendations lead to the client’s most important goals? What will they cost?

7. Comparing these results with the customer’s desired outcomes or goals, which recommendation is best? Choose the option that best serves the client, and use that as the basis of your proposal. Resist the temptation to recommend a solution that simply gives you the highest profit margin (or advantage). Think long term, and you may establish a relationship rather than just win a job.


Done right, proposals can be your best avenue to new business opportunities. Done wrong, they are a waste of time and money. The key to increasing your hit rate is focusing on the prospect’s needs so you don’t alienate potential customers like Sucher.
Adopt the Customer’s Point of View

Though companies use proposals to underscore why they should be chosen, prospects—who face a pile of five, 10, or even more proposals—actually seek reasons to eliminate candidates. So how do you stay in the running?

“A good proposal specifically addresses a prospect’s needs,” says Michael Kelley, a Price-waterhouseCoopers partner who specializes in global advertising, branding, and marketing. “A poor proposal discusses only your credentials.” Never, for example, start a proposal by describing your corporate history.

Clarify expectations with a prospect meeting whenever possible. Kelley says such meetings also provide insights about the selection criteria and decision makers, and help establish the relationships that can lead toward selection.
Follow a Disciplined Process

A systematic, repeatable proposal-writing process ensures that all specs and budget requirements are met. It reduces the last-minute rush that breeds ineffectiveness and errors, and contributes to accurate pricing so that the job is both winnable and profitable.

This process should include:

**Thorough research.** “Spend at least as much time in studying, analyzing, planning, researching, and otherwise preparing to write as in writing itself,” writes Herman Holtz in *The Consultant’s Guide to Proposal Writing*. That’s how you develop strategies, solutions, staffing requirements, and even pricing. Often it’s helpful to show prospects initial efforts in these areas and ask for feedback, says Kelley, to improve your chances of fulfilling expectations.

**An outline of responsibilities.** You’ll need to put together a team to help create the proposal. Make clear assignments to key personnel— including managers, writers, and technical experts— and spell out deadlines. Include time for multiple drafts, graphics development, reviews, and production activities such as copying and binding.

**Careful attention to writing.** The proposal must clearly document an understanding of the problem, explain a solution, describe activities, and detail anticipated results. “Proposals are often won or lost on the effective ness of the writing,” says G. Jay Christensen, who teaches business communications at California State University. “Use simple, conversational English, with one idea per sentence. Avoid jargon. Revise, and revise again, for clarity.” Back up claims with case studies or research.
Other Tips

- **Personalize, personalize, personalize.** Proposals must be presented from the prospect’s point of view. Emphasize specific benefits and value over your general capabilities and expertise. Edit standard résumés to reflect experience that is important to the prospect.

- **Avoid boilerplate language, despite its value as a timesaver.** It’s easy to spot, and it gives people an excuse to discard the proposal: It sends the message that you do not consider the project important enough for personalization. The only places boilerplate is acceptable: standard contracts, rate sheets, and proprietary and nondisclosure statements.

- **Remember that details sell.** Avoid generalities and hyperbole. Banish every “uniquely qualified,” “extensive experience,” and other vague phrase that undermines credibility. Instead of saying, “We will provide a useful manual,” explain that a 50-page, 6 x 9 booklet will include an operational checklist as well as 10 questions at the end of every section to ensure understanding.

- **Paint a picture.** Graphics communicate clearly (especially when simple and easy to scan) and are useful for explaining complex processes. Tables outlining features and benefits are particularly powerful. Also use graphic elements such as callout boxes to highlight key points. Summarize with bullets where appropriate.

- **Be concise.** Keep the proposal as short as possible. Some RFPs have page limits; look at those as outer limits, not targets. It’s tempting to add everything that a prospect might be remotely interested in, but such material dilutes your ideas and capabilities. One
distinct benefit: Short proposals usually get read first, which makes yours the standard by which others are judged.
Frame the Proposal

Like a movie trailer, the proposal’s **executive summary** should pique interest with appealing highlights, communicate the essence of the coming presentation, and help your audience determine whether to invest further “viewing” time. So it demands your best thinking—and writing. Often, it is the only section decision makers read.

As Christensen points out, “Executive summaries don’t write themselves. They require an in-depth understanding of the proposal as well as an ability to succinctly communicate reader-specific benefits with punch and verve.” They’re neither prefaces nor introductions. They must include analysis, scope, recommendations, implementation highlights, and, most important, benefits. Length can range from one or two paragraphs to one or two pages. (One rule of thumb says 10% to 15% of the length of the proposal.)

Like proposals, the more concise executive summaries are, the better. Use bullet points to telegraph key concepts or activities. Avoid fluff like “We are pleased to present....” Instead, point out to prospects that, for example, you propose setting up a European distribution network that can increase sales 40% by 2005. Says Kelley: “The more specific it is, the more they’ll know you’ve listened and you understand their problems.” Don’t be afraid to mention pricing; prospects will immediately scan the proposal for it anyway.

Experts debate about whether to write the executive summary before or after the proposal. Try combining the strengths of both approaches: Write it beforehand to crystallize themes and benefits, and then revise it afterward so you can capture the most relevant points by culling key sentences from the proposal.

To get started, write a sentence that states the prospect’s problem, your solution, and the benefits. Expand that sentence into about 100 words. Then add supporting points until the most important issues have been summarized. (For more on how to tee up a proposal, see “Sell Your Proposal with a Strong Executive Summary” in this guide.)

The **appendix** is your other “bookend.” Here, you can expand or support points made in the proposal’s body. This material can range from brochures to photographs to video clips.
PricewaterhouseCoopers sometimes includes a CD with an organizational chart featuring members of the proposed team. Prospects can click on the name of a specific manager and see both a tailored résumé and a short personal introduction on video.
Take Time to Assess

The proposal process doesn’t end after submission. Proposals that have survived the prospect’s best elimination efforts may generate an invitation to present. The prospect uses this opportunity not only to discuss issues raised in the proposal but also to determine chemistry and competence.

Win or lose, see if you can get a debriefing. Debriefings are vital for improving the proposal management process and your win-loss record. If you win, find out why. Which areas stood out, and which were ignored? “Client guidance after the contract is awarded can also help you execute the project more successfully,” says Dan Safford, CEO of the Washington-based proposal-writing firm PS Associates. Clients may even be willing to share losing proposals for additional insights.

Loss debriefings are also valuable. Finding out why you were eliminated can strengthen future proposals. On occasion, it can provide a springboard to further work, especially if your recommendations or skills in a particular area were strong. “Both win and loss debriefings give me the opportunity to build a longer-term relationship, which is my prime objective,” says Kelley.

Too often, proposals are marketing afterthoughts, left to the last minute and filled with search-and-replace generalities. No wonder success rates suffer. But well-written proposals can actually be your best sales tool—and the start of a long relationship.

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Adapted from the Harvard Management Communication Letter (product #C0207A), July 2002.
How to Write E-mails People Will Read

by David Silverman

1. **Announce what it’s about.** The subject line is the only thing you’re sure recipients will read. “Re: re: re:” is not helpful. Neither is “Project Update.” Be specific and clear, as in “Revised Contract for Your Review” or “Off-Site Brainstorming Notes.”

2. **Stay on topic.** The best e-mails say one thing and say it clearly. One-subject e-mails also make it easier for recipients to file messages once they’ve taken action, something anyone who uses Outlook to manage tasks appreciates.

3. **Provide context.** Do your readers know that your company will lose $37 million if a shipment of hamburger buns doesn’t make it to Iowa? If you’re not sure, remind them.

4. **Focus on the strongest argument.** Should those hamburger buns get shipped right away because a delay is embarrassing for the company, because it’s costing children their lunch, or because it’s costing the company tens of millions of dollars? Maybe all three, but one of those reasons (and it depends on your readers) will be enough to get buns on the road.

5. **Write short.** Readers on the run will struggle to digest a long message. A BlackBerry or an iPhone displays about 40 words per screen. What looks short on your desktop monitor is an epic epistle on a mobile device.

6. **Use numbers and other specifics.** “The project is currently way behind schedule on major tasks” is not as clear as “Our vendor is three weeks late delivering hamburger buns to Des Moines.”
7. **Kill your favorite bits.** Is something in your message particularly pithy, amusing, or clever? If it sticks out, it’s probably a tap-dancing gorilla in boxer shorts—hilarious when you thought of it, embarrassing when it lands in your manager’s inbox.

8. **Omit anything you come up with in the heat of emotion.** Will a certain sentence show people who’s been right about the hamburger buns since the beginning? Yes? Leave it out.

9. **Omit useless words.** “In fact,” “personally,” “I think,” “actually,” “literally,” and their ilk are almost always empty of meaning. Find your personal word demon and exorcise it. For me, it’s the word “even.”

10. **Put last things first.** Writing is like a 1972 Buick Estate Wagon in the winter. It starts up cold, and not until you’re almost at your destination does it warm up. Invariably, the best thing you think of is the last one. Take that gem and put it at the top of your message to sum up everything in the first sentence.

11. **Don’t bcc.** Remember that no matter how you send it, e-mail is as private as a postcard slapped to the watercooler.

12. **Use formatting for readability.** Include bolded headings, bullet points, and numbered lists—and insert blank lines between paragraphs—to allow readers to scan for your main points.

13. **Be sensitive to language and culture differences.** Avoid statements that require knowledge of the local sports star, pop-music icon, or lunch dish. This is as true from New York to London—where allegedly the same language is spoken—as it is from New York to Tokyo. “Bubble and squeak,” for example, is a food(-like) substance in the United Kingdom. In the United States, it’s the thing my baby does in the bath.

14. **Set the right tone.** If your audience is your family, you can make jokes about the dog’s tendency to drool on Uncle Phil. If it’s the management committee, cut the cute.
15. **Revise before sending.** Have you ever bravely sent something unrevised only to have it come flying back at you with a vengeance? Even the simplest missive to one person benefits from a couple of extra passes for tightening, correcting, and clarifying. And if it’s going to the management committee, expect everyone to have changes (and changes to those changes).

16. **Give it a day.** With time, what seemed so urgent may no longer need to be said. And one less e-mail to read is a gift to everyone.

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David Silverman has been an entrepreneur, an executive, and a business writing teacher. He is the author of *Typo: The Last American Typesetter, or How I Made and Lost 4 Million Dollars*.

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What people are saying on HBR.org

Posted by ESC Williams:
I would add: Revise the recipient list as you revise the content. Far too much time is wasted by far too many people having to read things that are irrelevant or uselessly iterative. (How many e-mails do you have in your inbox that say “thanks” or “agreed” to someone else?)

Posted by James Ballard:
Do not reply to an e-mail and write about or attach something that has nothing to do with the original message. There is nothing more confusing than trying to find something buried in an e-mail chain. Just type up a new e-mail and title accordingly. Also, try to send it to one person and cc everyone else. State the person’s name at the beginning of your message so everyone knows who the e-mail is for. You can judiciously add more people to the “to” line as necessary, as long as you make it clear who you are talking to throughout the message.

Posted by Patricia Chapman:
Don’t fill in the “to” line until you’re finished with the body. This will keep you from accidentally sending before you’ve had a chance to finalize the message.

Posted by Julie Mackenzie:
Include your contact information in your signature—every time. This may seem painfully obvious, but so many people don’t do it.

Join the discussion at blogs.hbr.org.
Is Your E-mail Concise—or Curt?

by David Silverman

A reader of my blog on HBR.org wrote with the following query:

I manage 15 staff who are scattered about. I e-mail them since it’s the easiest way for me to communicate with all of them at the same time. Often my e-mails are very short and to the point. It’s business. Two staff see that as my being harsh and have no problem letting me know that.

Here’s an example: “Would you please update these primary care providers in the database, including addresses and phone numbers?”

Six days later, I sent this follow-up to my initial request: “I would like this taken care of by Thursday this week. If you are having trouble getting this done, please let me know.”

In return, my employee sent me a four-paragraph response on how insulted she was by my follow-up e-mail. I would like your opinion.

On the one hand, the employee’s response was out of line. What was she hoping to achieve? It didn’t help get the project done, and it almost certainly didn’t improve her relationship with her boss. I’d go as far as to say he’d be justified in reprimanding someone for aggressive behavior like that.

But I’m speaking as a boss (or customer) who’s sent e-mails similar to the ones above. I’ve also been the recipient—and felt rising anger every time one of my bosses sent an e-mail beginning with “Please provide the revised presentation…”

Perhaps unexpectedly, it was the “please” that drove me over the edge. Although I didn’t fire off a petulant four-paragraph response, I did seethe quietly. And, more important, I didn’t feel very much like “providing the revised presentation.”
All the niceties the manager in the scenario above thought he was writing ended up sounding very different to his employee. In the echo chamber of the employee’s mind, absent other cues from the manager, “I would like” probably sounded like a passive-aggressive demand, if not a derisive sneer. “If you are having trouble” was meant as “I’m here to help” but interpreted as “I think you’re a dolt for taking six days to do a minor task.” The length of the e-mail compounded the emotional dissonance. The writer thought of it as just a quick note on a task, but his brevity came across as curt.

To make matters worse, the form of communication itself (e-mail) may have been interpreted as “Just so you know, I’m documenting your incompetence.”

Ouch, right?

Here are three suggestions for preventing this sort of problem with your own e-mails:

1. **Try calling instead.** If your goal is to check the progress of a task and give someone a chance to respond with questions, a call would accomplish this while allowing each person to hear the other’s tone of voice.

2. **Include deadlines when you first make a request.** If you give a due date in the initial request, your follow-up won’t feel as aggressive, and the recipient will be less likely to take it personally. Deadlines will also help people prioritize—perhaps rendering follow-ups unnecessary.

3. **Be conversational.** You don’t need lots of smiley faces or exclamation points. Just write the way you talk. For example, the second e-mail in the scenario above could read: “Hi Cindy, just following up on the e-mail below—can you let me know how far along the task is? I was hoping we could have this by the meeting on Thursday. Is that a possibility?”

Even the simplest e-mails need to be written with care. It takes time and thought to avoid giving the wrong emotional cues.
David Silverman has been an entrepreneur, an executive, and a business writing teacher. He is the author of *Typo: The Last American Typesetter, or How I Made and Lost 4 Million Dollars*.

Adapted from content posted May 22, 2009, on HBR.org. Other work by this author can be found at blogs.hbr.org/silverman.
What people are saying on HBR.org

Posted by Vickie Gray:
It isn’t an e-mail problem. It’s a trust problem. An e-mail like that would be considered efficient and clear between people who trust each other. Talk in person before trying to e-mail, be clear about expectations in any transaction, and set standards for communication that you both can sign up for. And deal with trust issues before trying to get anything else accomplished.

Posted by Lewis:
When in doubt, call or stop by someone’s cube, especially when you haven’t established a rapport with that someone. Once rapport is established, brevity will be appreciated. Also, cc’ing the world can make someone think you’re trying to make her look bad—not the way to win friends.

Join the discussion at blogs.hbr.org.
Business writers agonize over word choice, syntax, and structure. But they often overlook one of the most important steps: matching the tone of the piece to the occasion—and to the audience.

You probably have a keen sense of what’s appropriate when talking to others. But do you apply this judgment in your e-mails, letters, and proposals? Your tone determines whether readers are turned on or put off by your message, whether they laugh with you or at you. To strike the right chord, carefully monitor your energy level and degree of formality.
Energy

Ask yourself, “How hot or cool should this message be?” Here are examples of both extremes.

Hot:

Anyone who hasn’t had his head in the sand lately knows about the big problems we’re having in the marketplace. Competitors are taking aim at the weaker items on our product line and inflicting mortal wounds. As a result, we’re hemorrhaging revenues. How do we stanch the bleeding? Dump our weakest products, and channel our energy into the stronger ones. That means we must pound out a powerful marketing plan to drive home the advantages of our products to the public. Let’s brainstorm ASAP to come up with a strategy that has teeth. If we don’t, we all may soon be standing in an unemployment line.

Cool:

By now, most of us are probably aware of the critical challenges we’re facing in the marketplace. Competitors are cutting into our market share and diminishing our revenues. The only solution may be to forgo some of our less successful products so that we may concentrate on the more successful ones. To do this, we’ll have to streamline our marketing efforts to communicate value to consumers. This will require planning sessions to develop an effective strategy. I recommend that we proceed with all deliberate speed to develop a viable approach. The consequences of failing to move quickly and incisively could indeed be dire.

Though these two passages convey the same content and have the same intent—to motivate readers to act—they vary greatly in tone. The hot passage draws on hyperbole, strong adjectives, and combat metaphors to communicate urgency. Vivid verbs and images incite the reader. The cool passage relies on readers to discern the seriousness of the situation by reading between the lines a bit. The hot passage is an alarmist call to action, which may be what you need to jar people out of complacency.
But if you’re worried about causing a panic, you might choose to cool down the rhetoric.
Formality

As with energy level, the right degree of formality depends on the occasion, the recipients’ predilections, and the culture of the company. Consider the following examples.

**Informal:**

You’ve already got the 4-1-1 on what I’m going to say: Our sales figures reek. Competitors are putting the hurt on us, siphoning money out of your pockets and mine. The only way out of this mess may be to trash the losers in our product line and pump up the winners. We’re history unless we grease our marketing skids. Let’s brainstorm ASAP to come up with a strategy that rocks. If we don’t, we’ll soon be asking, “You want fries with that?”

**Formal:**

Only the myopic could now be unaware of our unfortunate position regarding market share. Our sales figures have reached a nadir, and our competitors are getting the best of us, much to the detriment of our pocketbooks. Perhaps the only solution is to forgo the less profitable of our offerings and focus our attention on our more successful products. Crucial to a recovery will be a well-crafted marketing program designed to heighten consumer demand. Failing to devise such a strategy may make all other concerns moot.

The informal passage is dominated by colloquialisms. It uses pop-culture slang instead of lofty metaphors. Thirty years from now, readers would have a hard time understanding its meaning. Yet now, the tone might connect with certain audiences—for instance, employees at a start-up that designs snowboards. By contrast, the formal passage seeks no personal connection and avoids common parlance. It distances the writer from the audience. Although some readers might view the tone as condescending, others might regard it as appropriate.

In many ways, you’ll find that the decisions surrounding energy and formality overlap. Informal compositions tend to be hot or at least warm (though that’s not always the case).
Formal writing is typically cool, but it can sometimes include warm elements such as metaphors or short sentences that call for strong action.
Reality Check

Seldom do even professional writers achieve the appropriate tone on the first draft. It takes a refined sensibility and careful honing.

To make sure you’ve got it right, ask some people whose judgment you respect to give your writing a test read. Do they think it’s too energetic or hyperbolic for the audience and the occasion? Or is it too frosty? Is it too familiar or too distant? What are the offending words or phrases? How can you change them to do the job at hand?

Using test readers is hardly rocket science, but people who go to the trouble invariably produce more effective writing. And it’s less time-consuming than toiling futilely in isolation.

Richard Bierck is a business writer based in Princeton, New Jersey. His work has appeared in U.S. News & World Report, Bloomberg Personal Finance, and Parade.

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Five Quick ways to trim Your writing

by John Clayton

Word comes back from your boss on the report you labored over for weeks: “This is good, but it needs to be a lot shorter.” You throw up your hands in frustration. She doesn’t tell you what to cut or how. Your report brings together all the information the committee needs to make a decision on the project. Every section furthers the argument, you say to yourself; there’s nothing extraneous in it.

Similar challenges crop up in many business settings: Say you need to trim a product description to 200 words, squeeze a presentation handout onto one side of one page, or cut the executive summary of a complex, detailed report in half. Here are five tips for losing length without losing meaning.
1. Simplify the Structure

Which parts of your argument support the roof, and which can be cut away without making the whole building collapse? Previewing and then reviewing your message may be fine for lengthy reports and essays, but when you’re squeezed for space, it amounts to building three walls to do the job of one. If you’ve written an introductory paragraph that includes one sentence on each point the body text will make, delete that paragraph and jump right into your message.

Also, provide only as much foundation as you need. Maybe you’ve included detailed background information. Does your audience really need it all to understand and be persuaded by your argument? If not, summarize it briefly and get right to the bottom line.

Finally, entire sections may be unnecessary. Cut anything that illuminates something other than your main point.
2. Stick to Specifics

Specifics make up the meat of your argument, generalities the carbs. Put your writing on a high-protein, low-carb diet. A telling anecdote or statistic will stay with your audience longer than a generality and will usually convey the broader message.

Think of how politicians often expend their precious time in a speech or debate highlighting a specific hero’s story. They know that telling the story (of a wounded soldier, a laid-off worker, an entrepreneur) is an effective way to put forward a platform (better weapons, more unemployment insurance, lower taxes).
3. Use Formatting

You might think that illustrations and headings will eat up space, but in fact they can reduce how many words you need to get your message across.

**Headings.** Headings are useful because they clarify a report’s organization, eliminate the need for topic sentences, create white space, and help readers skim. But the way they’re usually formatted—on a line by themselves, sometimes with a blank line following—takes up a lot of room. If you want the space back without losing the headings, convert them to in-paragraph headings like the one at the beginning of this paragraph.
Other Tips

- **Omit the obvious.** Rather than write, “Obviously, this means we will need to raise prices, which could reduce sales,” try, “Our need to raise prices could reduce sales.” If something is obvious, why waste space saying it?

- **Convert “of” phrases to possessives.** For example, change “the success of the company” to “the company’s success.”

- **Replace bloated phrases with simpler words.** “An adequate number of” can be replaced with “enough”; “notwithstanding the fact that” is a windy way of saying “although”; and “during such time as” simply means “while.”

- **Use active verbs.** Passive constructions require extra verbiage. “The lights must be turned off before the office is vacated” is wordier— and weaker—than “You must turn off the lights before you leave.”

- **Never express a number in both digits and words.** There’s no need to write, “Twelve (12) people attended the meeting.” Either the word or the numeral works fine on its own. Your corporate style manual may have specific guidelines, but following two general principles can save you space: Never double up, and always use numerals for large numbers (“200,000,” not “two hundred thousand”).

**Tables.** If you want to compare and contrast various options, do so in a table rather than in running text. A table presents complex comparisons in a succinct way. Your readers can compare and contrast Options A and B, Options B and D, or Options A, B,
and C, as they want; you don’t have to write out all the similarities and differences.

**Maps and diagrams.** Think about how long it takes to write out directions: “Maple St. is the third stoplight. There’s a Denny’s on one corner and a used-car lot on the other corner. If you get to the Clarksdale city limits, you’ve gone too far…” A map conveys the same information concisely and accessibly. Flowcharts and organizational charts likewise show complex relationships in easy-to-understand form, as long as they’re kept simple.

**Boldface type.** To make sure your audience remembers what you have to say, you may be tempted to use phrases such as “This is the key to the whole thing” or “If you take one message away from this document, let it be the following.” Instead, put the message itself in boldface, and its importance will be clear.
4. Downshift Your Tone

There is something about report writing that causes people to adopt a formal, bureaucratic tone. When you write this way, you use bigger words, more parenthetical phrases, and more complex sentences. If you shift to a less formal tone, you may find that your writing is shorter and clearer.

Try using some contractions. It’s not that changing “cannot” to “can’t” and “will not” to “won’t” saves so much space, but contractions can help you avoid the long, formal style of bureaucrats, explains Edward P. Bailey in *Plain English at Work*. Another way to downshift your tone is to speak directly to your audience, using personal pronouns such as “you.”
5. Cut and Combine

Look for ways to cut words by combining sentences. Consider this passage:

*This presentation examines the benefits of outsourcing. It is my recommendation that we reduce overhead by outsourcing noncore processes such as customer service, fulfillment, and other support functions.*

The first sentence is dead weight since it’s implied by the second. Cut it and revise what’s left:

*We should reduce overhead by outsourcing such noncore support functions as customer service and fulfillment.*

You’ve now announced your topic and stated your position on it with wording that’s almost 50% leaner than the original.

*John Clayton* is an independent business writer based in Montana.

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How to Write Correctly Without Knowing All the Rules

by John Clayton

You’re writing a report about a visit to an affiliate office, and you type the sentence “Everyone here, even she, believes her data are flawed.” You pause. Should that be “even her”? It doesn’t sound right, but you can’t put your finger on why. Stopping to ponder it, and perhaps to consult a grammar book, you lose your train of thought. You soon start wondering if “believes” should be “believe” and if “data are” should be “data is.” Every such mental debate chips away at your productivity—and your confidence in your writing.

It’s a dilemma: Poor writing sends a bad message to readers, but you don’t have time to wrestle with all the complexities of grammar and usage.

The more productive solution is to avoid these quagmires altogether. You don’t have to demonstrate your knowledge of grammar rules. Just choose words and phrases that are easier to handle.

Let’s return to whether the first pronoun in the example should be “she” or “her.” The correct answer is “she” because the pronoun addresses the subject (rather than the object) of the sentence. But you need not know this to write a correct sentence. You can simply avoid the issue by using the person’s name: “Everyone here, even Linda, believes her data are flawed.”

Now, for those who are hung up on the verb “believes”—it’s correct. (“Everyone” is an indefinite pronoun, and indefinite pronouns nearly always take singular verbs.) But again, you can rewrite the sentence to avoid that construction: “Each person here, even Linda, believes her data are flawed.”

Finally, there’s the question of what verb to use with “data.” Like “criteria” and “media,” it is a plural noun and thus takes a plural verb: “data are.” But so few people know or use this rule that many experts now accept the singular: “data is.” Given this wishy-washy state of affairs, the best solution may be to rewrite the sentence so that “data” doesn’t require a
verb: “Each person here, even Linda, believes there are flaws in her data” or “…flaws weaken her data.”

Let’s look at some other examples:

How about “The proposal will sink or swim on its merits”? Does “its” need an apostrophe? The rule is that “it’s” substitutes for “it is,” whereas “its” indicates possession (so the sentence is correct as written). But if you’re not sure about the rule, rewrite the sentence: “The merits of the proposal will determine if it sinks or swims.”

Consider the sentence “The effect of the regulation will be to raise costs.” Should “effect” be “affect”? It’s a noun, so “effect” is correct. (The only time “affect” is a noun is when it refers to the manifestation of emotion.) But why not avoid the issue and write, “The result of the regulation will be to raise costs”?

In The Art of Spelling, Marilyn vos Savant notes that homophones (words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings) cause problems because your spell-checker won’t see anything wrong when you misuse them. Commonly confused homophones, she says, include “capital/capitol,” “complement/compliment,” and “palate/palette.”

A quick look at a dictionary will clear things up, but you may not have ready access to one. When you come across a problem word, focus on your intended meaning, not on the word itself—and then it’ll be easier to think of a good substitute. Instead of “capitol,” use “State House” or “Congress”; instead of “capital,” use “Washington” or “Albany.” Instead of “compliment,” use “praise.” Instead of “palette,” use “available colors.”

Usage problems often arise from the desire to show off knowledge. Take the abbreviations “i.e.” and “e.g.,” which are commonly confused and often incorrectly punctuated. You can avoid them by swapping in the phrases “in other words” (for “i.e.”) and “for example” (for “e.g.”).

Or how about good old “who” and “whom”? In The Manager’s Guide to Business Writing, Suzanne D. Sparks cites this example: “There’s a bonus for whoever finishes on time.” Should that be “whomever”? Who cares? (Or, if you prefer—to whom does it matter?) Just rewrite the sentence: “If you finish on time, you get a bonus.”
All you need to know is how to identify problems and steer clear of them. For example, the “who”-versus-“whom” problem arises when your question contains prepositions, such as “to,” “for,” and “against.” So when you see that you’ve written a question with prepositions, rewrite it without them. Rather than “Who are you speaking to?” (which is, to grammatical perfectionists, incorrect) or “To whom are you speaking?” (the correct, though formal, version), write, “Who is your audience?”

Note that the focus here is on rewriting sentences. It’s OK to write them incorrectly the first time. In fact, that’ll allow you to focus on your train of thought. You can go back and proofread later. It’s easier to rewrite several sentences in a second draft than to keep interrupting your thought process to write them perfectly the first time.

John Clayton is an independent business writer based in Montana.

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Is Following the “Rules” Tripping Up Your Message?

by Chris Bielaszka-DuVernay

Will gravity fail if you end a sentence with a preposition? No, of course not. In fact, your most sophisticated readers won’t even bat an eye. And it’s not because they’ve become so accustomed to the shortcuts and improvisations of e-mail that they don’t notice when someone breaks a rule. They still notice, all right. It’s just that they know that some “rules” aren’t rules at all—and never were. They’re superstitions. Here are the four most common:
1. Never End a Sentence with a Preposition

This is one of the most enduring of superstitions, despite centuries of commentary trying to dispel it. The origins of this bugaboo lie in etymology and in the origins of English grammar, explains Bryan A. Garner in Garner’s Modern American Usage. In Latin, “preposition” means “stand before,” and in Latin a preposition does indeed stand before other words; it’s the one part of speech that can’t end a Latin sentence.

But English is not Latin. Although English grammar is modeled on Latin grammar, the languages are very different and some rules just don’t translate well.

Criticized for ending a sentence with a preposition, Winston Churchill is said to have quipped, “That is the type of arrant pedantry up with which I shall not put.” As this absurdly stilted sentence demonstrates, the syntactical contortions necessary to keep sentence endings preposition-free can result in awkward, turgid prose—not the best vehicle for your message.
2. Never Split an Infinitive

The fact is, some infinitives beg to be split. Consider this sentence: “We are trying to immediately solve any customer-service problems that arise.” It’s fine the way it is—no need to tie yourself in knots trying to keep “to” and “solve” together. Transposing “to” and “immediately” confuses the meaning because “immediately” then appears to modify “are trying.” Placing “immediately” after “solve” makes the sentence stilted. And moving “immediately” to the end of the sentence is no good because there it appears to modify “arise.”

With split infinitives, the best bet is to steer a middle course. If you can avoid a split in finitive without altering meaning, introducing ambiguity, or interrupting flow, you should do so, advises Garner. If not, don’t worry about it.
3. Never Begin a Sentence with “And” or “But”

Go ahead and do it—you’ll be in good company. The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites sentences beginning with “and” that date back to the 10th century. A scholar in the 1960s, says Garner, studied the work of top-flight writers—H.L. Mencken and Lionel Trilling among them—and found that nearly 9% of their sentences began with “and” or “but.” Garner’s own research has turned up similar results.

Some writers substitute “however” for “but” at the beginning of a sentence, believing that by so doing they’re hewing to the grammatical line. What they’re doing is stalling the progress of their prose. “But” keeps things zipping nicely along, while “however”—followed by its obligatory comma—is a verbal speed bump.
4. Never Write a One-Sentence Paragraph

Varied paragraph length, like varied sentence length, is a hallmark of a skilled prose stylist. Writing a one-sentence paragraph is an excellent way to grab the reader’s attention or emphasize an important point.

Just don’t overdo it.

Chris Bielaszka-DuVernay is a former editor of Harvard Management Update.

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