

INTRODUCTION

WRITING ELECTRONICALLY

Put it before them briefly so they will read it,
clearly so they will appreciate it,
picturesquely so they will remember it
and, above all, accurately so they will be guided by its light.
—Joseph Pulitzer

We do most of our business by e-mail. Our marketing information is on the web, and our staff is putting our internal information—policies and procedures—on the intranet. Our people just don't write much anymore." A rather odd, but common, comment. What else do people read on the web and in their e-mail? Words.

More, not fewer, people write. And more people write more. We used to pick up the phone for day-to-day tasks. But so many people now screen their calls with voice mail that we've found it easier to reach them by e-mail.

Just two years ago, the most "important" writing tasks were still done primarily by professionals at the top: engineers, lawyers, auditors, analysts, controllers, sales and marketing executives, and middle managers. But with the advent of e-mail, even entry-level workers write—to inform customers when they can expect to receive their razor or robe; to apologize for a billing error; to let their team know that the Friday meeting has been postponed; to ask a vendor for a faster delivery; or to tell their coworkers about new procedures.

Screen or paper matters not.

How do we write thee? Let us count the ways: e-mail, websites, bulletin boards and chat rooms, online information centers for employees, form letters to customers, boilerplate fill-in-the-blank proposals loaded on account executives' laptops, team reports edited simultaneously online, job postings on the Internet that generate electronic résumés.

In today's e-commerce, written communication makes the competitive difference in overall organizational success. Customers, clients, and prospective business partners often check out your website before they even phone or fax you. If your words on the website don't communicate what they need to know or help to build your credibility, you'll never get a chance to connect with prospects by phone or face to face. Ask any salesperson how many real-time conversations they have with prospects or customers.

Today, more than ever, poor writing tempts a customer to click away, doubting that your technology or service is any better than your written communication. An e-mail, a web headline, or a product proposal that contains disorganized ideas, convoluted wording, intimidating layout, or grammatically incorrect sentences, tells clients that you won't service their engines well, amortize their mortgage correctly, or interpret their insurance coverage fairly.

First impressions stay around a long time. But what's the payoff when people and organizations write things correctly? Increased profits and productivity.

Case in point: Thirty-something Angie recently landed a new job without ever having met her new boss in person. She works for a Fortune 50 telecommunications company, and for the past seventeen years there, she has enjoyed her share of all-expenses-paid trips to Hawaii as a reward for her contributions to the company. She has worldwide responsibilities and administers a budget of hundreds of millions of dollars. In short, she's obviously no slouch at what she does.

But after spending eight years in one job position, she developed an itch for a new challenge. After learning through the grapevine about a new position being created, she e-mailed a résumé to the vice-president in charge and expressed a willingness to fly in for an interview. The vice-president e-mailed a response with mild interest, stating that the job required relocating to Atlanta, and that the position demanded high-level thinking and interaction with senior executives at client firms. In her job overview, the hiring executive emphasized that 50 percent of the job would involve writing documents (letters, summary reports, proposals, and marketing materials) to demonstrate the value-added service the firm offered to client organizations worldwide.

Angie responded that for personal reasons she could not relocate to Atlanta, but she still wanted to set up at least an interview. She mentioned that

she had another job offer in the wings, but while she was making a career move anyway, she wanted to be sure she had considered all her options.

Rather than decide yes or no about the interview, the vice-president asked her to e-mail a few samples of her writing so that she could compare them to those of other candidates under consideration. Within the hour, Angie responded with the samples. Within eight hours, the hiring vice-president picked up the phone and offered Angie the job—solely on the basis of her writing talents. And never mind the move to Atlanta.

Such is the power of high-impact writing.

This Fortune 50 company is not the first to hire or fire based on impressions created by writing skills. Consider the traffic on websites such as hotjobs.com, computerjobs.com, CareerMosaic.com, monster.com, and the e-mail exchanges these sites generate.

A few years ago, *USA Today* carried a front-page headline: "What Employers Look For." The accompanying story reported a nationwide survey among 3,000 hiring executives who were asked for their top criteria in hiring professionals. Number one was attitude. Number two was communication skills. Communication skills ranked ahead of both work experience and academic or technical training.

That ranking is no surprise. Peter Drucker, the most internationally respected name in modern management, has been saying the same thing for years. In *People and Performance*, he writes:

The further away your job is from manual work, the larger the organization of which you are an employee, the more important it will be that you know how to convey your thoughts in writing or speaking. In the very large organization, whether it is the government, the large business corporation, or the Army, this ability to express yourself is perhaps the most important of all skills you can possess.... This one basic skill is the ability to organize and express ideas in writing and speaking.

Universities today, even the best ones, are suffering from arteriosclerosis, according to Warren Bennis, author of numerous books on leadership and professor at the University of Southern California. Why that glum conclusion? After interviewing business leaders and graduate students five years into their careers about ingredients missing from their formal education, Bennis has discovered a big hole in their skills set. The skills most frequently cited as missing? "More leadership and interpersonal communication skills, writing,

oral communication, and presentation of self—that is what our graduates five years out are telling us they lack."

Does this lack hit us personally in the pocketbook? Stephen Reder, a linguist at Portland State University, working in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Education, has measured how American adults' verbal skills affect their earning power. He found that among people with a two- or four-year college degree, those with the best skills in writing ability earn, on average, more than three times what those with the worst skills earn.

The importance of writing stands to reason. Your boss, coworkers, or customers can't or don't follow you around on the job. They don't see how you handle people or projects day to day. They simply see the *results* of your work—documented in database notes, in your e-mail, or in your reports and proposals to them. Clear writing reflects clear thinking. Your writing becomes your face on the page or screen.

Giving information isn't enough. Information doesn't necessarily result in proper communication. We have intranet and Internet information sprawling around the globe, yet still we hear the ubiquitous employee complaint: "There's just no communication around here." With a computer on every desk, in-boxes overflowing with e-mail, paper printouts piled high, and faxes on every front, what do people mean by that statement?

People know how to use the medium, but they have difficulty shaping and sharing the message.

Readers Complain

- "I get six or seven copies of the same e-mail forwarded by different people. Although I delete a lot of it without reading it, I'm always worried that I'll miss something important."
- "I hate websites where you can read pages and pages of information and still don't know what the organization does."
- "I can't tell exactly what the writer wants me to do."
- "The writer doesn't get to the point soon enough. I don't have time to go to the second screen."
- "People ramble. I have to dig out the main idea."
- "What the writer assumes is obvious, is not."

- "People put in too much background detail."
- "They use too much technical jargon and too many acronyms for anybody outside their area of expertise."
- "There's too much hedging and avoiding the issue."
- "The writing is too formal. It sounds pompous and silly."
- "The writing is too informal. Vendors offend me when they're flippant or use colloquialisms or make personal comments as if we're good buddies when I've never laid eyes on them."
- "The tone causes an adverse gut reaction—particularly in directives from a peer who doesn't have the authority to tell me to do anything."
- "Some people sound wishy-washy. They try to be so careful to be tactful and not hurt your feelings that you can't even figure out the real message."
- "Subject lines are unhelpful. I can't tell what needs an immediate response and what can wait."
- "When I get copied on something, I often can't tell if I'm supposed to take some action or if things have already been handled. So I'm left thinking: Why did they tell me that?"
- "Our policy and procedure manuals—and even the online help and hyperlinks—look too intimidating. I have trouble just finding what I need to know."

Writers Complain

- "We do a lot of things by committee or team—even writing up formal reports and presentations. By the time everybody puts in their two cents' worth, we've gone through six or seven drafts. It's a waste of time for everybody."
- "We have lousy boilerplate proposals that we try to customize, but some manager somewhere thinks they're good, and so we're all forced to follow that dictated format."
- "My boss never tells me why a report or letter or proposal was revised before it got passed on. So how do I know how to do it any differently the next time?"

- "When my manager asks me to revise something, she never gives me suggestions. So it's a shot in the dark whether I'm going to get it right the second time. Or the third. Why can't managers tell you exactly what they want—rather than always what they *don't* want?"
- "I can't find good writing samples to follow, and setting up new formats takes time."
- "I'm fuzzy on grammatical points. And I don't even have a clue whether the grammar checker on my software is right when it high-lights things for me to change."
- "I don't like to write, so it's difficult for me."
- "My supervisor is on an ego trip when he edits my work; everything has to be said *his* way."
- "I spend so much time staring at the screen, trying to decide how to start."
- "I never know who the reader will be—we typically write to a wide audience."
- "How do you know how detailed to get? I have trouble deciding what I can assume my reader understands and what I need to explain."
- "I get e-mail and letters on my desk that I'm supposed to respond to, yet I'm usually the one with the least information about the whole situation. How can I respond if I don't have all the information?"
- "Writing takes too much time. I'd rather just walk in and tell somebody what I want. But the trouble is, my competitors leave behind a proposal. And by the time my buyers go to their team with an overview of what we're offering, they've forgotten what I told them on the phone or in their office. I'm clearly at a disadvantage when I don't sum up meetings or phone calls in writing."
- "Liability is a big fear. When I'm writing to a customer about a problem, the lawyers have us half scared to death that we're going to cause a lawsuit."
- "Sometimes I see errors in my team's reports, but when I point them out without using the exact terminology or citing the specific rule, people think I don't know what I'm talking about. It's hard to keep quiet when you know something's unclear or grammatically incorrect. Worse, *my* reputation suffers because *my* name's on the document, too."

- "Why bother? My boss rewrites most everything I do anyway."

The burden for untangling these communication crosswires falls on you, the writer. If the reader has not understood your message, you have not written well.

Why is e-writing any different from the writing of twenty years ago? Volume, for one thing. In our surveys among 17 companies across ten different industries, 72 percent of respondents say they spend 1-2 hours daily handling e-mail. Ten percent of those e-mails received are unnecessary and unwanted. The biggest recent complaint about e-mail, cited by 30 percent of respondents, is disorganized, irrelevant, missing information. Another 26 percent complain that the e-mail they receive is too technical for their purpose.

Another difference: Not only must your writing be clear, correct, complete, and concise, but it also has to connect.

Years ago, if your letter or memo sounded too stiff or formal, you could overcome that weakness by being personable face-to-face. If your proposal confused your coworkers or clients, you could clear up the issue orally in a meeting. If your instructions muddled a coworker's mind, you could walk down the hall and demonstrate how to do the job.

Today, these clarifying measures often no longer apply. Your entire relationship with coworkers or customers may rest solely on your e-mail exchanges. You may complete a \$50 million project without ever meeting your coworker or client face-to-face. You may report to a boss who's never walked into your cubicle. You may deliver a sales pitch by written proposal rather than by plane.

This book is for those who want to accept the challenge of making a significant cultural change and leap in personal productivity. We have to tame the tongue's technology to make it work for, rather than against, us.

The good news: There's a process and there's a format. The bad news: It'll take you a few hours or days of practice to learn them. But my guarantee is that if you'll use the five-step thinking process detailed in the following pages and embrace the e-mail protocol and productivity tips, you'll increase your credibility and strengthen your relationships.

Specifically, you'll learn to:

- Reduce your writing time.

- Improve clarity.
- Organize your ideas succinctly.
- Select appropriate details and data.
- Reduce document length, thereby saving reader time.
- Write authoritatively and persuasively.
- Respond efficiently and effectively by e-mail or letter.
- Eliminate irritants for recipients, caused by an inappropriate tone.
- Build rapport with your customers and coworkers by selecting an appropriate tone.
- Avoid liability issues caused by communications blunders.
- Protect your privacy and that of your organization.
- Project a professional image.

You can translate these outcomes any way you like in your organization.

Now that the gee-whiz has worn off our communication technology, what do you say we make life easier, rather than harder, for one another?

A very great part of the mischiefs that vex this world
arises from words.
—*Edmund Burke*
