

E-Writing: Five Steps to Clear Thinking on Screen or Paper

Excerpted from E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication [Pocket Books] by Dianna Booher

Screen or paper—it matters not. Email is only the method. Good writing represents clear thinking. An employee at a large oil company submitted a suggestion that netted him \$18,000 from his company's incentive-awards program. Although I can't share the award-winning idea, I will relate what rigors he suffered in getting the idea accepted.

He sent a 19-page first draft to his immediate supervisor, who read the paper and suggested cutting it in half. A few days later, he handed the second draft to the same supervisor, who then suggested cutting the proposal to five pages. Being a persevering guy, he returned with his original idea trimmed to the five-page skeleton. But knowing top-management readers well, the supervisor then suggested one last cut: "Put it on a page."

Upon learning of the \$18,000 award, the writer had almost forgotten the painful process of cutting his prose until these words of the vice president who presented the award reminded him: "You were particularly astute to present this complex idea in so few words. A lengthy document on this subject would probably never have been read."

Few writers learn so easily and with so much to gain. Here are five steps to help you pare your documents accordingly:

Step 1: Consider your audience for the proper approach.

Step 2: Anticipate special problems in your reader's reaction.

Step 3: Outline your message functionally in a functional format.

Step 4: Develop the first draft.

Step 5: Edit for content and layout, clarity, conciseness, style and grammar.

Let's go back and fill in the details:

Step 1: Consider your audience for the proper approach.

Ask yourself the following questions:

Do I have a single reader or multiple readers?

How will my reader use this information?

What's the bottom-line message to your reader?

How much do your readers already know about the subject?

Step 2: Anticipate special reader reactions that may prevent others from accepting your message.

Will your reader be skeptical about claims or objectives? Is the situation sensitive? Is money an issue? Will there be loss of face? When any of these situations or circumstances are the case, anticipate adverse reactions and plan to overcome them from the start.

Step 3: Outline your ideas and information in a functional format.

About 90 percent of all business communication should answer these questions in the following order. **So what's your point? What do you want me to do? What details do I need to know?**

So what does this functional format have to do with conciseness and clarity? In the traditional once-upon-a-time format, writers present ideas in the order of their thinking or research. Readers must trudge all the way up the hill before they get to stand on the top and understand what the message is really all about; the writer controls readers' time and forces them to plow through the details before getting to the punch-line.

On the other hand, in the descending outline, the readers begin on the top of the hill and can see what's below. Then, having the basic message and expected action in mind, they can jump off the downhill trail when time or interest dictates and still know they have the essential information.

A vice-president may stop after the first paragraph or two: With this "layered" arrangement of details, your audience can read as much or as little as necessary to make a decision or take action.

And what does all this have to do with clarity? Plenty. The details don't make sense until readers get to the punch-line—what's in it for them. However, in the descending format, the reader immediately understands the point of the message and what the writer wants. With this information in mind, readers can evaluate the details as they read through the first time, eliminating the rereading that is all too common in documents written in ascending order.

Step 4: Draft quickly.

By the time you reach this step, half your work is finished. Developing the first draft should go quickly and smoothly if you have followed the preceding "thinking" steps. All you need do in this step is add flesh to your skeleton: Turn your key words and phrases in the step-three outline into idea wheels or sentences.

Step 5: Edit for content and layout, conciseness, grammar, style, and clarity.

Good writing is rewriting. Mark Twain once commented: "The difference between the right word and the almost-right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

As you've probably discovered from experience, it's that one missing detail or one awkwardly placed phrase or clause which elicits 14 phone calls or necessitates a follow-up email or letter.

Always allow a cool-off period before you edit. Otherwise, you read what you think you wrote. Better yet, have someone who is unfamiliar with your subject proofread the document. And when that person comes back to you with questions, don't just verbally explain the unclear parts, answer the questions or fill him in on the background, and then leave the writing unchanged!

Clarity: Delivery of the reference manuals along with the reference library and A/V equipment has been scheduled in late April, pending R&D approval. What is pending R&D approval—the delivery or the scheduling?

Conciseness: Did you write, “The efficiency with which an operation utilizes its available equipment is an influential factor in productivity” (16 words), when you could have written, “Efficiency in using equipment influences productivity” (6 words)?

Style: Strive for a style somewhere between stuffed-shirt writing and T-shirt writing. Just as the business casual dress code has some people stumped, so has the business casual writing style. Some writers confuse the screen for a T-shirt slogan: aggressive words. Made-up words. Silly misspellings. Poor grammar. Others wear stuffed-shirts on screen: Overbearing and pompous. Here are some guideline questions: Have you included courteous words? Did you motivate readers by telling them what’s in it for them? Do you sound impersonal: “These assessments should be disseminated to all participants before initiation of the presentation.” Instead, try: “Please distribute these questionnaires to everyone before beginning your sales presentation.”

Grammar: Watch grammatical goofs such as, “Having discussed the problem with all the managers before the first day, the program has been modified to include the four additional topics.” (The program discussed the problem with the managers?)

Content/Layout: Did you create paragraphs by idea and for eye appeal? Are headings informative? Does proportion match emphasis?

Effective writing—whether online or on paper—requires training. Success comes by method, not chance. When you must write and when your writing must work, review and practice the five steps detailed here for effective communication. You may not become \$18,000 richer, but you *can* take much of the pain out of the process.

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