

LANGUAGE USE AND BUSINESS WRITING



DAN LIGHT CONSULTING

Transforming Potential Into Exceptional Performance

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Get Verbs Into The Prose.....	2
Use The Active Voice.....	3
Use Decisive, Specific, Concrete Terms.....	3
Omit Needless Words Or Phrases.....	4
Do Not Repeat Words.....	5
Avoid Ostentatious Words.....	6
Do Not Take Shortcuts At The Cost Of Clarity.....	6
Use transitional words.....	6
Express Like Ideas In Similar Form	7
Use Positive (Selling) Language.....	8

LANGUAGE USE AND BUSINESS WRITING

One of the most common problems encountered in business writing is obscure or sloppy prose. Unfortunately, business writing tends to be indirect, wordy and generally hard to follow. Often we worry more about impressing the reader with our knowledge than saying what we mean in language we can understand. In doing this we rely on jargon, clichés, passive sentence construction, and false or unfounded assumptions. Technical jargon is fine for technical documents presented to technical people; clichés are often used in an attempt to cover an absence of the proper words or worse yet, the absence of knowledge; passive sentence structure implies a passive approach or that the writer is embarrassed by, ashamed of, or unsure of what he is trying to say; and assumptions are asking someone else to speak for you when they really don't know you, your company, or your capabilities.

The object then is to ensure that the document created presents all we want known in a forceful, confident tone and that it is clearly understood by everyone asked to read it. To accomplish this we must develop the habit of using smarter prose; that is, prose that does not obscure the meaning of what is written but makes it crystal clear for the reader.

Smart prose is a habit. The more we practice it the more natural it becomes. Breaking bad habits and developing better ones at this stage in our lives requires a conscious effort. However, without this effort our writing will continue to be obscure and our business documents will continue to miss their mark.

The following paragraphs offer guidance for the individual writer: how to organize writing efforts, avoid frustrating blocks, and generally improve the clarity and persuasiveness of his language. The discussion focuses on two of the most common writing problems...technical jargon and lifeless prose.

Writing is a three-step process: **Prewriting, writing and revision.**

There are two functions of prewriting: research and outlining. Research is the process of collecting ideas and materials to be included in the writer's section. Outlining is the process of organizing the ideas and materials into a logical sequence.

Once the prewriting exercise of researching and outlining is completed, the section design is set and the writing begins. There is no one way to approach the act of writing and there are many factors that influence a person's ability to write...difficulty of material, deadline pressure, level of organization, and even mood. The writer must be flexible enough to know when to speedily write a tentative draft or when to perfect a particular section. Most important, the writing must keep moving. The writer should be constantly acting, whether he is composing, reworking, or consulting the outline for change.

The following guidelines **can make** the writing ordeal easier:

- Write in a way that comes natural. Write as you speak and do not assume a lofty style.
- Make paragraphs the unit of composition. They aid the reader by:
 - ❖ signaling the start of a new topic
 - ❖ providing breaks in the text **to** help the reader comprehend the material
 - ❖ emphasizing certain points
- If a section is **particularly** difficult to write, leave it for the end (this is particularly true for introduction) It is not necessary to write in the order in which it will be read.
- Write on paper with a margin in order to note additional ideas, questionable spelling, and revision issues.
- **Do not** assume the product is without flaw.

Revision is a part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they want the first time they try. Quite often, on examining the completed work, the writer will discover serious flaws. Remember, it is no sign of weakness or defeat if your manuscript needs major revision. The revision process is a conscious process, not a creative one.

The following points will assist the writer who is trying to write words that clarify rather than confuse.

Get Verbs Into The Prose

Business writing tends to rely on nouns, or nominalizing verbs, rather than actions. Consider the following passage:

Managers are faced with continual adjustments and maintenance of that balance in light of program risk, unknown occurrences, and trade-off decisions. This complex acquisition environment necessitates the effective utilization of program control techniques to ensure program success.

Looking at these two sentences, we see that the first one has one verb and seven nouns. The second sentence is somewhat better; it has two verbs (neither active) and four nouns. The reader is likely to get confused and never really understand what it is you are trying to say.

Consider the following rewrite:

Managers must continually adjust and maintain balance, and maintain that balance all the while considering the program's risk, unforeseen events, and compromising decisions. To do this and to ensure the program's success, the managers must use the outlined control techniques.

The main difference between the first and second passage is the movement away from nonworking verbs to action verbs. Business documents would improve 100% if writers would make hidden verbs come alive.

Here are some examples to consider:

AVOID	WRITE INSTEAD
Accomplish an adjustment	Adjust
Effect a reduction	Reduce
Make a measurement	Measure
When an oscillation occurs	Oscillates
Operates to improve	Improves
Exert a twisting motion	Twist
Make a calibration	Calibrate

Use The Active Voice

Similar to nominalization is the passive voice. Both create indirect and obscure sentences. A reader has certain expectations when reading. Among these is the expectation of seeing a subject in front of the verb. For example:

SUBJECT	VERB (Active)	OBJECT
John	remembered	the keys
We	shall visit	the museum
The contractor	provides	the solution

In each case, the action and the actor are clear to the reader; the sentences are forceful, direct, and unambiguous. They are in the active voice. Often writers violate the expected order of subject-verb by using the passive voice: they place the object of the sentence in front of the verb, and can thereby only imply an actor. The sentences above can be rewritten in passive form in this manner:

OBJECT	VERB (Passive)	OPTIONAL SUBJECT
The keys	were remembered	by John
The museum	shall be visited	by us
The solution	is provided	by the contractor

The active voice is more direct. Active sentences are easier to read because they do not violate the reader's expectations and because they simply have fewer words than passive sentences. Furthermore, active sentences remind the buyer of who would do the work. That in itself is an affirmation of our capabilities; one which might make a difference to the buyer when it comes time for a decision.

Use Decisive, Specific, Concrete Terms

Choose words that call up specific images and more easily captivate the reader's attention. For example, instead of writing, "A period of unfavorable weather set in", it is better to be more specific by writing, "It rained every day for a week". The latter sentence is more powerful simply because it is grounded in concrete detail: rain, day, week.

To show what happens when strong writing is deprived of its vigor, George Orwell once took a passage from the Bible and made its concrete details abstract. Here is the verse from

Ecclesiastes:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happen to them all.

Orwell's translation":

Objective consideration of contemporary phenomena compels the conclusion that success or failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with the innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must inevitably be taken into account.

The former is much more vivid and much more powerful. The latter is, however and unfortunately, more characteristic of the writing found in most business documents. While business documents generally do not discuss races or bread or riches or chance, the words in them should refer to the concrete. Common indecisive expressions are: negligible (write instead 1/10 of an inch, for example), approximately (write instead within two degrees), excessive (write instead three pounds too much), evidently, apparently, tends rather, more or less, reasonably, considerably. These expressions are not always bad; sometimes they are necessary. The writer should, however, avoid overusing them merely out of habit. The following table of abstraction shows the various ways in which the same object can be precisely or imprecisely described:

SPECIFIC	LESS SPECIFIC	ABSTRACT
Bolt	Aircraft Wing Component	Delivery Item
Red Maple	Maple Tree	Vegetation

A writer should keep his terms as close to the left-hand side of this table as possible.

Omit Needless Words Or Phrases.

Vigorous writing, the kind required in business communications, is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words; a paragraph, no unnecessary sentences — for the same reason that a machine should have no unnecessary parts. This does not mean all sentences should be short, or that detail be omitted; rather, it simply means every word should matter to the meaning. If not, the word is an obstacle and the prose can ramble pointlessly, losing the reader.

Many commonly used expressions violate this principle. Below, those on the left are wordy, while those on the right are more economical versions of the same terms.

WORDY	CONCISE
The question as to whether	Whether
There is no doubt but that	No doubt
Used for fuel purposes	Used for fuel
It is a difficult one	It is difficult
The existing regulations	The regulations
Completely full	Full
May result in damage to	May damage
The marks provided on the chart	The marks on the
He is a man who	He

In particular, the phrase "the fact that" should be avoided. It is almost always unnecessary, as illustrated below:

WORDY	CONCISE
In view of the fact that	Because
Owing to the fact that	Since
Call your attention to the fact that	Remind you
The fact that he has not succeeded	His failure
The fact that I had arrived	My arrival
I was unaware of the fact that	I was unaware

Do Not Repeat Words.

The writer should watch for and avoid phrases that use two words with the same meaning, such as:

REDUNDANT	CONCISE
Horizontally level	Level
Audible to the ear	Audible
Red in color	Red
Uniformly consistent	Uniform
Assemble together	Assemble
Properly tuned	Tuned

Also, the writer should avoid repeating words from sentence to sentence, if he possibly can. For example, the following paragraph (in addition to being wordy) unnecessarily repeats the same terms:

Inherent in the determination of environmental conditions is the implications that frequency, duration, intensity, and interactions among the factors will also be considered. The manner and rate of the reactions of the item to the effects of environmental factors may change with the intensity, duration, or frequency of the factors.

The following revision of that paragraph amends (as best it can) the repetition, as well as some of the obscure wording:

The study of environmental conditions involves consideration of the

following factors', frequency, duration, intensity, and the interaction of these three. The manner and rate of the item's reaction may depend upon these factors.

A poor translation, perhaps, but who knows? The repetition and confusion of the paragraph make it difficult for the reader to get the essential message. Can you afford to let the recipient of your document guess at what you are trying to say? Hardly. The writer would do better to avoid the possibility of mistranslation by being clear, concise and unrepentive.

Avoid Ostentatious Words

Lofty words do not always convey lofty ideas. Sometimes the best ideas are those that can be expressed simply and clearly. The writer should avoid showy words when simple ones will do. Some examples:

SHOWY	CLEAR
Terminate	End
Institute	Begin
Elevated	High
Excessive amount	Too much
Individual	Person
Phenomenon	Event
Mitigate	Lessen
Formulate plan	Plan

Do Not Take Shortcuts At The Cost Of Clarity

Do not use initials for the name of organizations, processes or other things unless you are certain the initials will be readily understood. Write things out. A good rule of thumb is to start the document by writing out names in full, and then, later, when the reader has his bearings, shorten them. Nonetheless, many shortcuts are self-defeating; they waste the reader's time instead of conserving it. The one truly reliable shortcut in writing is to choose words that are strong and surefooted to carry the reader on his way.

Use transitional words.

Between sentences, paragraphs, and sections, the writer should use transitional phrases. Such phrases connect ideas for the reader, and are therefore essential to winning writing.

There are a number of ways to make transitions. Of course, the writer should rely on pronouns (he, we, our; and conjunctive adjectives (these, this, those) to make connections and avoid repetition:

REPETITIOUS

The team will include technical, managerial, and cost specialists. The technical, managerial, and cost specialists will report to the proposal manager. The manager will allocate tasks to the technical, managerial,

and cost specialists.

CONNECTED

The team will include technical, managerial, and cost specialists. These members will report to the manager, and he will allocate tasks.

Certain transitional are important for holding together the prose. Some of these are: however, nevertheless, nonetheless, while, at the same time, concurrently, although, therefore, thus furthermore, as such, in this way, on the other hand, unlike, in contrast to, similarly, in summary, finally. The writer should use these transitional phrases to make the logical relationships between ideas clear.

Express Like Ideas In Similar Form

The principle of parallel construction requires that expressions similar in content be grammatically similar. The likeness of the grammatical form enables the reader to recognize more readily the likeness of content. Parallel construction simply makes the prose easier to read; it is just one more way of establishing connections in the reader's mind.

The Sermon On The Mount is a classic example of parallel construction:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth

These phrases are constructed in the same way, each with a "blessed" phrase, followed by a "for" phrase. The similarity of the form, line to line, helps the reader receive the overall message by setting a grammatical expectation for the following lines. The parallel structure also makes the passage more effective and easier to remember.

Business documents are not works of poetry, but parallel construction is a useful device for making them more powerful and clearer. The unskilled writer may avoid parallel structure in the effort to vary his sentences. However, when two ideas are similar, variety works against what the writer is trying to say. For example:

NOT PARALLEL

Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method, while now the laboratory method is employed.

PARALLEL

Formerly, science was taught by the textbook method; now it is taught by the laboratory method.

In the latter example the word "it" restates the word "science", such that the two clauses are parallel.

Parallel structure is, however, more than just a stylistic device for clarity. Often it is necessary, particularly in lists and series. When constructing a list, the writer must start each phrase with the same grammatical construction. For example:

FAULTY	CORRECT
Develop techniques	Develop techniques
Manage personnel	Manage personnel
Low cost services	Offer low costs

Use Positive (Selling) Language.

Word choice is an important factor. Scattered pessimistic terms can work against a forceful image. When describing your capabilities, it is best to avoid terms such as: a policy, failure, misfortune, limit, complaint, decline, cheap, hardship, effort, sketchy, impossible, or superficial. Even more important than avoiding such terms is finding a way to use positive statements that convince in themselves: ability, diversity, determined, proficient, progress, practical, fidelity, stability, expedite, reliable, economical, useful, enhance, salient, definite. The writer should not overuse such terms. Overuse can seem insincere. Positive terms should be tied to concrete details — reinforcing soundness, not creating a false stability. Nonetheless, the writer should make such words an important part of his writing vocabulary.

The best "selling" language is clear, sincere language. When the customer does not feel frustrated by a barrage of imprecise, seemingly meaningless prose, he is bound to be more receptive to the ideas that the prose express. No amount of fancy wording can convince a confused buyer. Business writing, like all writing, must communicate as quickly and directly as possible. If it does so, the sale is halfway achieved.

(NOTE: Much of what was presented in this article was taken from Elements of Style by E.B. White and William Strunk. For more detailed discussion writing, consult this short but excellent book.)

DAN LIGHT CONSULTING provides an innovative approach dedicated to the development and realization of business potential.

Are your organizational strategy, people and processes aligned? The degree to which there is alignment between strategy, people, and process, greatly impacts the likelihood of achieving success. If there is misalignment, the likelihood of achieving strategic goals is proportionally reduced.

Does your strategic plan serve as a road map to achievable success? To become the business that you strive to be your mission, your vision and your values must inspire you to set goals and established an action plan for their achievement. It must also be clearly communicated to each and every employee so that every action drives it outcome toward achieving business goals and objectives.

Are your management systems structured to meet your goals and objectives? Are the ways that managers and supervisors behave, think, communicate, delegate, and reward employees consistent with the organization's strategy?

Do your operating systems enhance your management systems? In efficient or in adequate operating systems (business processes) can diminish the return on the best action plan.

If you'd like to learn more about how we can help you more effectively build your business, please call us at 540-439-2410 or visit Dan Light Consulting on the web at www.danlightdirect.com.