Writing for Success on the Job:
Best Principles and Best Practices

By Don Bates
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Eighteenth century moralist Joseph Joubert said, "Words, like eyeglasses, blur everything that they do not make clearer." This is no less true in business than in journalism or other professional occupations where the importance of writing is obvious. As a manager who needs to communicate well with others in order to be effective, you too need "a way with words." Writing is a measure of how you think and act.

To write well, says author Jacques Barzun, you should have an attitude towards words that "the musician has toward sound and the painter toward line and color."

This doesn't mean that you have to be a member of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra or have your work exhibited in the National Museum. Only that you have to be a skilled craftsman, regardless of the import of what you write. Someone who uses words carefully and responsibly in letters, memos, reports, proposals, blogs—in whatever they write.

The key to success is adhering to fundamentals without making you a slave to rules. No one is "born" an accomplished writer. You learn by doing.

Making Change

Good business writing starts with an overriding goal: Make something beneficial happen. Usually, this means favorable action on behalf of your company's or organization's goals. Depending on your communication's purpose, the person or persons receiving it—staff, managers, suppliers, customers and other VIPs—could buy, sell, invest, vote for, endorse, join, recommend, support, assist, refer, inquire, and so forth.

Obviously, a lot of business writing is viewed differently. For lack of time, training, inexperience or just plain fear, many managers consider writing a burden rather than an opportunity. Instead of viewing it as a management tool with important implications for their success and their company's success, they consider it an imposition. Instead of treating it with care, they concentrate on "getting it out"—getting it into the hand of recipients as quickly as possible so there's one less thing on the "to-do" list.

We see the result in our mailboxes: letters, memoranda, reports and proposals that we read halfheartedly, if at all, because too often they are poorly written. How do you assure that your business writing isn't treated accordingly? You use time-tested "rules and regulations" that journalists, copywriters, editors and other communications specialists know and practice. If you need more reason, consider what your boss thinks.

In one survey of 800 chief executive officers, 98% agreed that writing ability is "important for success" in executive posts. Some 83% also agreed that younger managers are poorly trained in the discipline. Biggest complaints of the CEOs: wordiness, weak organization, inappropriate tone, no clear-cut objective.

"The lack of good writing," wrote one chairman of the board, "is perhaps one of the most costly wastes in business." Bad writing eats up reading time of highly paid executives, creates misunderstandings and errors, and often makes it necessary to do the job twice at more than twice the cost."

Setting the Stage

Good business writing begins with answers to fundamental questions. Here are examples:

- Who am I trying to influence? What special characteristics do they embody?
- Where are they located? How do I reach them? In what form? At what time? Under what conditions?
- What do they want to know? What do they need to know? What do I want to tell them?
- How should I frame my message? In what style? From what perspective? How simple? How complex?
- What should I say? How do I get them to accept or appreciate my point of view? What arguments should I make? What facts should I incorporate? What enclosures?
- How do I evaluate the results of what's been written? What measurements should I take? What standards should I use?

Answers to questions like these help you "see" your audience. They give you a picture of what you want to happen on the receiving end. Most important, they help to add impact to your messages. They give your writing the winning edge in achieving favorable action.

Getting Started

To move your thinking ahead, prepare a quick outline or rough draft that you can share with those who have an interest in what you're writing. Test market your copy or ideas with one or two people who will approve or receive the final communication.

You also need to do some research. This is especially true for documents reaching or intended for large audiences; e.g., annual reports, newsletters, management bulletins, speeches, audiovisual presentations and brochures. Also, Web sites, Web casts and related Internet-based communications. Before you write, you have to think through what these documents should convey.

Consider several sources: your customers and clients; your colleagues and friends; professional and trade associations; your company and public libraries; the Internet and online databases; anyone and anything that can provide you with information and interpretation that you can use in what you write. Consider, also, what you can borrow from to make your writing more persuasive:

- Press coverage and editorial opinion related to your subject.
- Summaries of research from your own organization and other sources (pollsters, the media, government reports).
- Policy documents (bylaws, corporate mission statement, warranties), management reports and prior communiqués.

- Comments, ideas and suggestions from experts inside or outside your company or organization.

Besides providing material that adds color, depth and context, these resources enhance the authority of your message. They make your writing more credible.

Filling the Gaps

You can add enclosures to what you've written. Besides beefing up what you have to say, they can provide information you don't have to create from scratch:

- Plans, outlines, reports
- News and feature articles from national and local media
- Letters and memoranda from staff, customers, legislators, et al
- Photographs, illustrations, charts, cartoons
- Reprints of speeches, letters to editors, legislative testimony
- Brochures and other publications.

Enclosures should be useful, of course. Before including them, ask if they will make your communication more effective? Will they enhance the content? Will they substantiate your views? If not, leave them out.

Look at cost, as well. Is the expense of collecting, collating, perhaps printing, this material worth the anticipated impact?

And make sure your enclosures are being transmitted with the proper authorization. Are they or should they be marked for copyright, trademark and other forms of legal protection? Do you have the right to reproduce them? Do you need to reference your permission?

Facing the Music

Now, the toughest part of business writing is actually writing. But the task needn't be a chore, especially if you learn the rules addressed in scores of texts and how-to books.

Shortest (less than 100 pages each) and two of the best are *Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, and *The Golden Book on Writing* by David Lambuth. These classics lay out the basic philosophy and guidelines for plain writing. Longer and more complex, but equally rewarding, are Jacques Barzun's *Simple & Direct*, which is filled with concepts and examples, and *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser, a guide to all kinds of nonfiction.

If you want to dig deeper into contemporary notions about writing, there is *Writing without Teachers* by Peter Elbow. Elbow's mission is getting people to think and write more freely and confidently before they start tackling grammatical rules and schoolroom assumptions about the correct way to write.

When it comes to books on editing one's words, none is better than Richard Lanham's *Revising Prose* or *Revising Business Prose*. Lanham's "Paramedic Method" is a priceless gift to all writers, but especially for those just getting started or those who have trouble writing simply.

Basic Training

All books or essays on writing are intended, among other things, to make it easier for us to inform, inspire, entertain, educate, persuade and motivate our readers. They begin with fundamentals:

- Know your needs and your audience's needs.
- Choose a sensible point of view or angle of coverage.
- Understand the limits of the format you've chosen to write in.
- Select an appropriate style (formal, informal).
- Consider what has been written on the subject before.
- Understand what to cover, whom to quote, what to incorporate from your sources of facts, research, opinion.

In other words, do what you must to write well.

Giving Yourself Guidance

When you get to the details of writing, turn to the elements of style, the steps that help you to frame your words more coherently, accurately, syntactically, appropriately. **Use short sentences, shorts words, short paragraphs**. Take your cue from news stories, feature articles and editorials in newspapers or magazines. Journalists have pioneered most of the basics of good business writing. They start with the goal of reaching as many people as they can. They normally write to be understood by the average teenager even when they are writing for older, more sophisticated audiences.

The best way to write short form is to write sentences as directly as possible. For example, instead of saying…

Good writing begins with an understanding of your audience and then proceeds to the use of words in a clear and logical fashion with the intention of giving your reader the easiest explanation of the subject you are covering, the end product being a communication that is taken seriously rather than casually and that makes the reader think or act differently as a result…

Try something like…

Good writing begins with an understanding of the people you want to reach. By using the right words clearly and logically, you make it easy for them to grasp your message. The end product should be a communication that helps them to think and act differently.

Write simply and directly. Get to the point quickly and cogently. Don't beat around the bush with verbiage or extraneous information. Often we don't write plainly because were afraid our readers will judge us as unsophisticated or uneducated. Write to be understood and you won't have to worry. Use yourself as a guide.

- How do you prefer things to be written?
- How quickly do you want to read and comprehend them?
- What style do you like?
- How short, how sweet?

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Your own preferences will help you to appreciate why simplicity and directness are not only desirable, but also essential.

Here are a few cautions to keep you on track:

- Use active, not passive, voice – "Thank you for" rather than "I would like to thank you for," or "I know that" rather than "It has recently come to my attention that."
- Omit needless words – put "since" or "because" in place of "owing to the fact that," or "He is trustworthy" in place of "He is a person whom we can trust."
- Avoid clichéd or hackneyed expressions – "at this point in time," "it goes without saying" (then why say it?).
- Minimize adjectives; e.g., "The successful product" rather than "The well-known, well-respected product, which is very successful and profitable."
- Avoid euphemisms such as "passed away" instead of "died."
- Avoid redundancies such as "rise up," "totally destroyed," "future plan," "make perfectly clear," "drop down," "absolutely right."

Simplicity is an elusive, almost complex thing, William H. Whyte, Jr., and the editors of Fortune magazine, said many years ago on the publication's editorial page. It comes from discipline and organization of thought, intellectual courage, and many other attributes more hard-won than by short words and sentences. Plain talk, honest plain talk is not the means to simplicity; it is the reward of it.

The Added Touch

Good business writing is as much a product of editing as inspiration. Always check what you write for spelling, syntax, organization, style. Sharpen your prose by cutting, trimming, rewriting. Editing takes time, but the contribution is priceless.

Good editing begins with knowledge of grammar, punctuation, paragraphing, diction and so forth. Most books on English composition will get you started in the right direction.

Few people realize how badly they write, says author and editor William Zinsser. Nobody has shown them how much excess or murkiness has crept into their style and how it obstructs what they are trying to say. An illustration will help. During the height of World War II, President Franklin Roosevelt received the following regulation:

Such preparations shall be made as will completely obscure all federal buildings occupied by the federal government during an air raid for any period of time from visibility by reason of internal or external illumination. Such obfuscation may be obtained either by blackout construction or by terminating illumination.

Roosevelt is said to have scrawled a one-sentence rewrite that said:

Cover the windows or turn off the lights.

Good Habits Help

If possible, write while you're in a good frame of mind at the time of day that works best for you, in a place where you feel most comfortable. Arrange your schedule and physical setting to enhance your creativity and productivity. Although no two people are alike in their writing habits, there are some common guidelines:

Block out writing time. Put it on your calendar just as you would business luncheons and appointments, then stick to your schedule. Give writing the attention it deserves and requires.

Build in privacy and freedom from distractions. This may mean writing at home, in a hotel room or at the public library. If you have to write in the office, turn off the phones so that you can concentrate fully on what you're doing. Make sure that those around you appreciate the reasons for your isolation. Obtain the cooperation and consent of your boss and other top management if need be. No doubt they would like the same consideration when they're faced with a writing assignment.

And make yourself comfortable. Arrange your writing area so that it works for you. Face the wall, face the window, close the door, stand or sit, do whatever you have to get your writing done efficiently and effectively.

Use planning aids. Some of the most common: flip charts, blackboards, index cards. Use them to outline the direction you want to go in, points you want to stress, quotes you want to use, facts you need to incorporate, and so forth. Arrange them so they're conspicuous and east to retrieve. Tack or tape them to your walls, door, chair, windows, computer. Toss them in logical piles on your desk or the floor of your office so you won't waste time looking for them once you're in the heat of writing.

Warm up before writing. Skim books for ideas and angles (tables of contents and indexes are wonderful sources), brainstorm on paper with notes and lists, take a walk to settle your thoughts, close your eyes and visualize the end product, exercise, meditate. Do what is necessary to prepare yourself intellectually, emotionally and physically, so long as you don't use this time to avoid writing!

Behavior is the Key

Good business writing consists of a healthy mixture of research, planning, experience, skill, common sense. By thinking through, designing, packaging and orchestrating the form and substance of your communications, you make it easier for your readers to take action on behalf of your company's or organizations goals.

Without this kind of focused attention, your writing will be treated like so much of what already arrives in the daily mail as an imposition in the flow of the recipient's workday rather than as an invitation for them to deepen their knowledge about something worthwhile or useful to them or their company.

In the end, good business writing shows you care about communicating with people who are important to your success and to your company's success. Treat your writing accordingly and you will gain a competitive edge, both personally and professionally.

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Don Bates is the Founding Director of the Master's Degree Program in Strategic Public Relations at The George Washington University's Graduate School of Political Management in Washington, DC, where he also teaches advanced writing. Prior to joining GW, he was Managing Director of Media Distribution Services, the country's largest marketing production and distribution service, and for more than a decade owner of a major public relations firm, which he sold in 1994. He has taught for five years in Columbia University Master's degree program in "Strategic Communications," and earlier at the New School University and New York Institute of Technology. Currently, he is Clinical Assistant Professor at New York University. Don's writings appear in textbooks and in scores of articles in trade and professional magazines. He has received many professional awards, including several Presidential Citations from the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) as well as the PRSA New York chapter's Philip Dorf Award for Professional Mentoring and its first President's Award for Outstanding Service to the profession.

APPENDICES

Writing for Readability
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• Use standard 10-point or 12-point serif (with squiggles) typeface for body text.
• Two of most readable typefaces are Times and Bodoni.
• Keep line length to less than 65-75 characters; i.e., two and half alphabets excluding spaces.
• No space or double space between paragraphs, indent first word in first sentence of each.
• Tabulate or bullet items in a series. Use no periods or periods at end of each bullet, not semi-colons or commas.
• Break up large areas of copy with boldface sub-headings.
• Underline or italicize important points, but sparingly.
• Whatever style you pick, be consistent.
• Proofread scrupulously. Make sure that what you've written has been word processed accurately without errors in spelling and punctuation. Always proofread with another person despite occasional inconvenience. Two pairs of eyes are better than one in spotting typographical errors. And proofread with aid of your finger, pencil tip or ruler to guide you past each word in a line. Otherwise, you won't catch as many mistakes. Some writers proofread in reverse from end of the manuscript to beginning, word by word. As an added protection, install and use spell-check software.
• Leave adequate margins, a minimum of one inch or more in most cases, on both sides and top and bottom of page.
• Use consistent format for headings and sub-headings, generally with same typeface but in different sizes and with different spacing arrangements to distinguish hierarchical nature of the material. Following is a graphic representation of three-level heading format.

- **1st order** 18 point type (bold, centered, all caps):

WRITING WELL TAKES PRACTICE

- **2nd order** (bold, flush left, headline case [capitalize nouns, verbs], paragraphs indented):

  Start by Emulating Good Writers (14 pt.)
  ¶ XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
  XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

- **3rd order** (bold, indented, sentence case, run-in text, paragraphs indented):

    Journalistic style leads the way (12 pt.): XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
    XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX.

Writing in Different Formats: A Sampler
By Don Bates

Audio-Visuals
• Write to be heard, not read.
• Keep copy brief, no more than 20 minutes in length.
• Use handouts to add information or fill in details.
• Use visuals to confirm or reinforce what is being said.
• For slides, limit number of copy lines to handful or fewer with only few words per line.
• Rehearse presentation in advance with test audience, preferably with mix of outsiders
and insiders, and make changes as appropriate based on their comments.

Business Letters
• Know what you want before you start writing.
• Write to a name, not a title.
• Get to your point in lead paragraph.
• Write to "you" the reader, not from "I/we" the sender.
• Be positive, pleasant, natural, specific.
• Organize look of your letter so it is presentable and readable.

Speeches
• Write for the ear, not the eye.
• Keep concepts simple.
• Read drafts aloud; work for smooth delivery.
• Keep formal remarks to no more than 20 minutes.
• Leave 10-15 minutes for questions and answers after speech.
• Read and listen to great speeches for inspiration, ideas, humility.
• Use anecdotes, local color.
• Use quotes from others sparingly, maybe two or three per speech.
• Merchandise or promote speech after its delivery (e.g., send out news release
summarizing what was said, share copies with staff and management, allow magazine
to reprint all or some as a byline article).

Types of Written Documents for Business & Management
By Don Bates

• Newsletters
• Newspapers
• Brochures & pamphlets
• Flyers
• Letters
• Books
• Catalogues
• Fact sheets & backgrounders
• Posters & bulletins
• Resumes & curricula vitae
• Audio-visual scripts
• Manuals
• Speeches & speech introductions
• Annual report & quarterly financial reports
• News releases & news bulletins
• Public service announcements
• Advertisements
• Magazines
• Editorials
• Letters to editors
• Feature articles
• Notes & memoranda
• Research & progress reports
• Photo captions
• Web sites

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