



Save Your Business from Bad Writing

Is bad writing drowning your business? Here's your rescue team.

How impressed would you be if a company representative met you with filthy shoes, shirt out and breath from the grave? Unfocussed writing riddled with errors turns people cold just as fast. Since writing reflects the writer, the subtext is that their thinking is muddled and they either don't know how to write well or don't care about detail—none of which are endearing business traits.

Unfortunately, chances are good your employees are sending sub-standard writing to your prospects or clients while you read this.

Many businesses tackle the risk head-on. According to a US National Commission on Writing survey:

- American companies spend up to US\$3 billion annually training staff to write better
- 40 percent of companies regularly invest in employee writing training
- Half of the responding companies consider candidates' writing skills when recruiting

With the potential to make or break relationships or deals and directly impact your bottom line, writing skills should be a high priority.

Here are tips for resuscitating your writing. Help's on the way!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul".

Paul Jones
Director, Magneto Communications

Breathing life back into your writing:

On a mission

Strong writing starts with a clear purpose. Cutting to the chase gives your reader context and helps you, the writer, stay on track. Often your goal will be to inspire action from your reader such as approving a new project, buying something or simply replying to your request. Step into your reader's shoes: If *you* were *them*, what would make YOU want to do what you're asking?

Tone deaf?

Ever been on either end of a misunderstood email? The culprit was tone, which is *how* you say something (try saying "Great work" to someone while rolling your eyes!). Writing—without gestures, facial expressions or voice—has to work much harder to avoid misunderstanding.

The best insurance is to put your first draft aside for a while—overnight if possible. Then read it again before sending it. You'll almost always see areas to clarify meaning.

Inside their heads

The ease with which you get someone's head nodding depends on your ability to get *into* it in the first place. If you know how they think, you can anticipate their reactions and push their "hot" buttons. So get to know them. Talk to them. Read what they read. A popular copywriter's trick is to look at a picture of your typical reader and imagine you're writing *just* to them.

Pyramid power

Take a tip from journalists: Prioritise your ideas, placing the most important ones (to your reader) at the head of your piece, followed progressively by less important ones. This "inverted-pyramid" style saves readers having to trawl for your main message.

Keep it simple, Simon

"Never use a long word when an exiguous one will do." Jokes aside, the simplest way to say something is often the best. Don't try to impress readers; just be clear.

Go with the flow

Writing with logical "flow" keeps readers engaged. Disjointed ideas and paragraphs are jarring, so plan your structure before you start. And before you finish, check your transitions—you can easily forget to fix them after cutting and pasting chunks of text. [Transitions are sentences that move readers smoothly from one idea to the next.]

Seeing red

Contrary to appearances, a document covered in red corrections is a sign of life—at least *you've* found the errors before your reader! Time spent proofreading will minimise embarrassing mistakes [did you catch that one?]. Sloppy spelling, grammar and punctuation make your writing harder to understand and diminish your credibility. The Golden Rule: Proofread important documents after you've had a break away from them—preferably overnight.

No train, no gain

Recently the Australian Human Resources Institute's (AHRI) magazine said, "Training and development opportunities are the number one factor attracting people to Australian companies." In the current talent crisis, a strong commitment to training and development is smart policy.

Given the business risks of poor writing it makes sense to include quality writing training in your Learning and Development program.

From our experience, it's not enough to just teach writing skills well. To maximise long-term impact, trainers should also work hard at motivating people to *want* to write better. Doing so can boost your credibility, sales and reputation, giving your business a new lease on life.