



April 2011

Golden Nuggets of Networking Wisdom

By Natalie Canador/Claire Meironitz –
Founders of C&M Business Writing Services

Bad writing: How much is it costing you?

That depends on what your employees are saying in their everyday e-mails, and how they're saying it...

- How well your organization's written proposals align with your company message...
and on
- Whether you are knowledgeably guiding the written materials that tell the world who you are.

PROBLEMS ARISE BECAUSE...

- Few people understand what good business writing is and how it works.
- The key role of writing in new media is widely misunderstood—and so is the impact of digital media on traditional communication.
- We fail to realize that business writing 2011 style is now our core tool for building relationships, establishing credibility, and achieving a competitive edge.

Many of our employees, especially the younger ones, are ill-equipped to write in ways that achieve business goals. They lack both the practical skills and the mindset.

WHAT TO DO?

1. Accept—as enthusiastically as you can—that every document going out of your office must be well crafted, from e-mails to websites and proposals.
2. Share this conviction with every staff member who communicates with clients, prospects, colleagues, suppliers, the media, the public—with everyone, actually.
3. Monitor all writing that represents your company.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR?

- ✓ Writing that is simple, clear, and totally unambiguous
- ✓ A clear sense of why the document was written and its intended result
- ✓ A tone that is unfailingly warm, positive, conversational, considerate, and courteous
- ✓ Messages built for speed reading, suited to today's world of skimmers
- ✓ An absence of all empty hype and promotionalism, and the words that go with them



April 2011

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE NEW RULES OF BUSINESS WRITING

“Communicate what
you mean
to get what you want···.”



April 2011

TRUTH

You don't need grammar
drills to spot your writing
problems



April 2011

When your writing is weak and awkward, look for clues that signal a problem. You can almost always simplify, shorten, and clarify. Sometimes you can solve a tough problem by throwing out the whole sentence or writing a new one. Be aware of the following signs that a sentence can work better, and you're on the road to better writing without having to think about grammar.

Heavy use of the word “of”

The CEO of the company that produces cosmetics made of pomegranate oil is of the opinion that demand will grow.

Why not:

The CEO believes that demand for the company's pomegranate oil products will grow.

What's wrong with this?

Few things affect quality of life as much as the removal of the waste products of our civilization.

Better:

Few things affect quality of life more than removing our civilization's waste products.

Too many to's

Jones needed to do something to revitalize the community relations project.

Too many –ing's

The lab is focused on developing nano-engineered particles that can be much more powerful in catalyzing combustion.

Better:

The lab focuses on developing nano-engineered particles that can more powerfully catalyze combustion.

Too many –ion's

The dimension of the problem is an indication of the infiltration of bad work habits.

Better:

The dimension of the problem shows that bad habits are infiltrating the workforce.

Try to use only one “to,” “or,” “ing,” and “–ion” per sentence.

When you follow up on these clues, you'll find they'll lead you to fix many of the same problem areas we've identified in other ways—using the passive tense, writing awkward or confusing constructions, including unnecessary words, and so on.



April 2011

At this point, you may want to ask: Will following these guidelines give me choppy, dull writing that makes me look like a simpleton? *Au contraire*. Consider the Gettysburg Address, *The Wall Street Journal*, Emily Dickinson's poems, Ernest Hemingway's prose, and the Declaration of Independence. All communicate the most complex human thoughts in simple, direct language that reaches people on a deep emotional level.

Editing tip #1 – Distance yourself from your work by a day or two when you can, or a few hours, at least. It'll be far easier to spot anything awkward, ambiguous, or unnecessary and a lot easier to find better ways to express your meaning. This definitely applies to important e-mails, and just about everything else.

Editing tip #2 – Find a writing buddy. Beyond finding mistakes, a backup reader will notice whether any “attitude” is showing—hostility, for example, when you write to someone you don't like. Your writing buddy can be a friend, colleague, or even someone at home.

Editing tip #3 – Sharpen your own editing skills with this activity: Select something you've written that's at least a page long and then cut it by half. Delete what's not necessary or important and anything off-message. Reword for clarity, simplicity, and brevity. Work in transitions as needed. Simplify sentences and tighten everything you can until you've reduced the piece to 50 percent of its original size.

Now compare the two versions. Which is better?

Try to expand your edited version by 25 percent, putting back some of what you're cut.

If you edit well, you'll discover that it's harder to add something back than it was to cut it out in the first place. Lesson? Editing, even by such an arbitrary standard, improves writing.



April 2011

USE your computer's Readability Index

Your computer gives you a tool, the Flesch Index, to instantly check how readable your writing is. It tells you the reading level of your material, the percentage of passive sentences, the average length of words and paragraphs, and the number of sentences per paragraph.

To bring it up, you may first have to be sure there's a check mark next to "Show Readability Statistics," which is usually under Tools/Spelling and Grammar/Options.

(Editing your own work is easy when you know what clues to look for and how your computer can help.)

Then, with a document on the screen, click the "Tools" menu and then click "Spelling and Grammar." Run the spelling check, and a Readability Statistics box will appear.

The first set of figures gives you an instant way to check how well you're following the guidelines in this book and using short words, sentences, and paragraphs. The second set gives you some major clues about overall readability. The higher the percentage of passive sentences, the harder it is for readers to relate to the material. Passive sentences tend to be formal, abstract, and static. Aim for between 5 and 10 percent.

The Flesch Reading Ease Score shows how many people will understand the document. A score of 100 points to a document so simple that "everyone" will understand it, and 0 denotes a very complex document: A score of 50 to 60 is a good goal, but when your audience includes numerous people with little education, aim higher.

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level indicates the years of education required to comprehend a document. *The Wall Street Journal* aims for eighth-grade level, which is hard to achieve. It's easier to write with more complexity.

Using the index – After you've completed a first draft, bring up the Readability Index. If the Reading Ease Score and Grade Level show that the writing is hard to understand, review your document to cut down on passive sentences and shorten them, replace long words with short ones, and break up long paragraphs. Recheck the index. It's a great way to improve your writing.