

MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD



The pen is a powerful weapon, but do you wield yours well? Follow these simple guidelines to improve your writing skills

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AT A GLANCE

- Most of us have picked up bad writing habits over time. The goal is to make our writing clear and concise
- Less formal language often conveys its message more clearly
- Think about the document's purpose and the audience you are writing it for

WRITING CLEARLY CAN BE HARD

work but the rewards can be great because, believe it or not, your clients do read many of the documents you give them.

You probably write most of the documents yourself, and the balance you would probably arrange through your other suppliers.

How do you think your clients feel when they're reading your correspondence? Do they feel engaged and confident, grateful you're their accountant, or are they confused and a bit intimidated?

Many accountants want to make their documents 'sound like they were written by an accountant'. But that's a false goal. Resist the urge to sound unnecessarily like an accountant, or whatever particular profession you belong to.

OLD HABITS

Most of us have a writing style based on habits we've picked up along the way. Some habits are good, but many are likely to be bad. Generally, we learn our writing habits in three places:

1. **At school.** Here, we learn restrictive and formalistic approaches. Overcoming those ingrained approaches – such as the total prohibition on starting a sentence with 'and', 'however' or 'but' – is sometimes almost impossible
2. **At university.** Our expectations of what is appropriate are set when we study at university and read – or at least run our eyes over – textbooks, legislation and other documents. On the whole, they are models of dense, formal, traditional writing
3. **At work.** We pick up habits when we start our careers and write documents for someone else to approve – often for several different people. We quickly learn to mimic each person's style.

It's a wonder any of us develop a clear, natural, human style – a style that clients value and enjoy reading.

The key to writing clearly is getting your head space right and committing to using a style that will suit your audience and your purpose. It's about replacing our bad writing habits with guidelines that lead to clarity.

Here are some useful tips:

Tip 1

Write about people rather than things and, as much as possible, write about your reader rather than about yourself. Consider the following example in which references to the reader are in bold text and references to the writer are in italics:

Before:

*“We refer to **your** letter of 20 August 2003. We have compared XYZ Pty Ltd’s revenue projections against sales figures and have attached a summary. We advise that the best course of action is to ...”*

After:

*“As **you** requested in **your** letter of 20 August 2003, here is a summary of a comparison of XYZ Pty Ltd’s revenue projections against **its** sales figures. In *our* opinion, the comparison shows **you** need to ...”*

The ‘before’ has five references to people, of which three are to the writer and two are to the reader (or their organisation). The ‘after’ has six references to people, of which one is to the writer and five are to the reader (or their organisation).

Aim for at least two references to the reader for every single reference to yourself.

Tip 2

Approach the topic by thinking more about what the reader wants to find out or needs to know. For example, in a letter advising a client, most accountants write about their view of the issues and solutions as applied to the set of facts in which the client finds themselves. Instead, write about a decision your client needs to make. For example:

“Here is the information you need to decide how best you can achieve [...]. To achieve your objective, you need either to [...] or [...]. The key qualifications you need to bear in mind when making your decision are [...]. Before you decide, check the following assumptions carefully [...].”

Tip 3

Free yourself from any excessive formality and tradition. Remember, you can move a long way from *formal* before you become *informal* – let alone before you become too

informal. Be comfortable in that middle space. It’s unlikely your readers will ever feel your writing is too informal.

Tip 4

Think about what your reader wants to know. Start your document with the main message first. Consider this scenario:

Your insurer writes an eight-page letter in response to your six-page letter explaining why you think it should pay the claim. Which bit of the insurer’s letter do you want to read first: the result or the build-up to the result? If your insurer:

- Puts the decision at the end of the eight pages, how much of the build-up do you read? Most people would read little, if any
- Puts the decision at the start of the letter and then sets out its reasoning, how much of that reasoning would you read? Most people would at least skim it.

Tip 5

Use lots of headings. Every time you change topic you need a new heading – otherwise the previous heading has become a lie.

As a rough guide, aim for at least one heading on every A4 page – preferably have at least two. Think about the best business writing you read:

- How much do headings help you find what you’re looking for?
- If you’re reading the whole document, do you like the way the headings give you clues as to when the writer is changing topic and what’s coming next?

Tip 6

Write sentences you’d be comfortable reading out across a meeting table to your client. If you couldn’t do this, rewrite them.

Tip 7

Use words that are familiar to your reader. The fact that a word is familiar to you doesn’t count.

Tip 8

As a general rule:

- Short words are better than long words
- Fewer words are better than more words.

Tip 9

Use words that put the right picture in your reader’s mind. For example, what do you think about when you read the word ‘redeem’? Probably ‘cash in’ or ‘withdraw’. But for many people, the word ‘redeem’ makes them think of angels, trumpets and Judgment Day. If you use ‘redeem’, the word could distract those people and cause them to mentally stumble.

Challenge yourself on the word-choice front. Would your reader be comfortable with that word? Is there a shorter way to say it? Will that word put the right picture in the reader’s mind?

It’s a good idea to work through one of the many good books (with practical guidelines and exercises) on business writing.

Tip 10

Clear communication depends on the document’s language, structure and design working together to make things clear for the reader. Design is all-important. Think about using graphics to convey messages. Ensure your organisation’s style guide is written on the basis that what matters is achieving successful communication.


Tip 11

Any testing you do of your style is likely to be worth it. Show some of your clients and other readers the same information written in different styles. Ask them to highlight any bits they don’t understand. Ask them which style they would prefer you to use.

You might be surprised how little readers value the formality and tradition of the style that someone led you to think was professional.

Tip 12

Make sure the style and clarity of the documents you provide:

- Live up to the burgeoning demand for clarity in corporate governance
- Enhance your relationships with your readers – especially your clients. 

Christopher Balmford is a former lawyer whose website www.cleardocs.com provides cost-effective, plain-language legal document packages for accountants.