

C COMMUNICATION

Write With Clarity, Convey Authority



Amy Campbell

In an economy where information rules, the ability to write with clarity and authority is a prerequisite for business success.

Getting a message through to an increasingly overburdened, overscheduled, information-overloaded business reader has become a competitive task. Here are five "power writing" tips to help you push your message past the clutter,

make your point and increase your own competitive advantage.

Headline Everything. In a fast economy, everything and everyone is moving. So put your message in your headline, as it is often the only part that many hurried professionals will read. Headlines are like free advertising space. Make them pay off by using them to say something specific rather than something generic. For instance, "Monthly Report" is a waste of communication real estate, whereas "Biotech Vacancies Lower Prices to 1999 Levels" makes a concrete point. Take advantage of an e-mail's subject line, a document's cover page, an e-newsletter headline and a PowerPoint presentation's title page to use the power of a good headline to get your main message through.

Write Upside-Down. Take everything you learned in English composition class and turn it on its head. Make your conclusion first, then use the rest of the document to support your conclusion. Your readers are busy, overworked, multitasking and on deadline. They don't have time to wade through multiple paragraphs to find out what the main gist of your report is (if you even have a gist). So, get to the point. As you build a reputation for being a no-nonsense, straight-shooting person, you will win friends and influence people inside and outside of your organization.

Keep It Simple. Use easy, plain language and short

sentences without "dumbing it down." Make your points in bullets and lists to make them stand out and easy to scan. As a rule of thumb, write tight and then try cutting that in half without losing meaning by eliminating inefficient words, phrases and sentences. Present details so that they are easy to access without obstructing your main message; use subheads, chapters, hyperlinks, appendices, attachments and footnotes to provide credible support and important detail to a short-and-sweet executive summary.

Make It Personal. Some days business people interact more with keyboards and keypads than with people, so make your e-mails and communications friendly and conversational whenever possible. Give the human element to people and you'll gain entry to them. Then serve them the information they need to know in a tight, little bundle and you'll be remembered. At the heart of this tip is the golden rule of communications: "Know your audience."

Master Active Voice. This tip is a little harder to put into action and may require you to do some real homework. Start by rereading your "Strunk & White." Learn to recognize and change the passive voice ("The bicycle race was won by Lance") to active voice ("Lance won the bicycle race"). Using active voice clearly identifies the subject of a sentence and eliminates confusion. Passive voice is notorious for obscuring the truth, as in the classic "Mistakes were made."

In an information-based world, everyone is writer and editor. Organizations and the individuals with the skills to best extract, manipulate and deliver information to internal and external audiences will gain a distinct competitive advantage.

Amy Campbell, principal of Infoworks!, is a Boston-based marketing communications consultant, writing coach and an award-winning e-newsletter publisher. The material presented here is digested from her forthcoming book, "Communication Power! A Crash Course for Increasing the Clarity and Authority of Every Business Document, Message, Strategy or Pitch."