

# 10 Simple Tips for Clear and Persuasive Business Writing



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## 1. Know your objectives and market before you begin writing

This sounds simple but is often forgotten. Before you begin, you should know what the objective of your business writing is. If writing a product brochure, for example, do you want the readers to enquire for more information or go to your website to buy your product? The goal of some business documents might be to raise your credibility in the eyes of potential buyers. For example, a company profile for a business with a complex and expensive offering will focus on the strengths and reliability of the company, and not attempt to get readers to buy the product or service immediately. Proposals are another type of business document, with the goals of showing the organisation's credibility, reliability and the value offered at the proposed price.

Along with your objective, it's essential to have a good idea of who your potential buyers are. You can start by asking "How does my product or service help them overcome the challenges they face?" Surveying your existing customers can uncover this information. Once you know how your customers see your product and its benefits, and how it solves their problems, you can tailor your business writing to emphasise their needs.

## 2. Keep your words as simple as possible in your business writing

One of the first rules of business writing and copywriting is to keep it simple. When writing for any format you need to keep in mind that people don't like reading long or complicated copy. One easy way to reduce the length of your copywriting is to use simple words. Business writing that includes simple words takes up less space and is easier to read.

Here are some ideas of how you can use simple words to improve your business writing.

<b>Instead of:</b>	<b>Write:</b>
accomplish	do
ascertain	find out
disseminate	send out, distribute
endeavour	try
expedite	hasten, speed up
facilitate	make easier, help
locality	place
optimum	best, greatest, most
utilise	use

You can see that simple words convey the same idea with fewer letters. If you apply this idea to your writing, it will be easier to read and take up less space on the page. Clear and succinct business writing is more inviting to readers, so there's a better chance your writing will be read.

You can apply this concept to wordy phrases by replacing them with single words.

<b>Instead of:</b>	<b>Write:</b>
with regard to	about
by means of	by
in the event that	if
until such time	until
during such time	during
subsequent to	after
it would appear that	apparently
adequate number of	enough

After you have completed a first draft of your business writing project, go back and edit what you have written. Replace complicated words with simple ones (a thesaurus is a helpful tool for this) and replace phrases with single words when possible.

### **3. Avoid long and complicated sentences**

Research shows that long sentences make text difficult to comprehend. In general, it's best to keep sentences below 35 words and aim for an average sentence length of around 20 words. Let's look at a few examples of unruly sentences and see how we can improve them.

Try reading the following 53-word sentence:

Drawing back on our years of experience in consulting to businesses in array of issues, from ISO 9001 to business design and strategy, we developed a unique methodology that offers you a real quality solution for your ISO needs, without the expensive price tag that is usually attached to quality ISO 9001 systems.

With a little editing, we can divide it into two sentences with an average length of 21.5 words per sentence:

We have drawn on extensive consulting experience – from ISO 9001 to business design and strategy – to develop a unique methodology that offers a quality solution to your ISO needs. We provide this without the typical high cost of quality ISO 9001 systems.

We also reduced the text by 10 words (from 53 to 43) without losing any meaning.

This next sentence is 46 words long:

Small business competes with big business, and while small businesses may not be able to offer regular promotions or share options, they may be able to offer other attractive benefits such as a friendlier work environment, more flexibility, greater responsibility, a parking space or family-oriented policies.

By cutting this sentence into three sentences, we reduce the average sentence length to 15 words and increase readability:

Small business competes with big business. While small businesses may not be able to offer regular promotions or share options, they may be able to offer other attractive benefits. These might include a friendlier work environment, more flexibility, greater responsibility, a parking space or family-oriented policies.

Often a good place to shorten a long sentence is when there is a conjunction such as “and” or “but”. If you find your business writing includes many long sentences, look for ways that they can be broken down into shorter ones.

#### **4. Use personal pronouns to avoid robotic business writing**

One of the first signs of robotic business writing is repetition of the company name. If you skim the text of many annual reports, for example, you will see the company name constantly repeated. Maybe the writer thought it wasn't appropriate to use ‘we’, ‘us’ or ‘our’ when referring to the company. But a key to effective copywriting is creating a conversational tone that includes personal pronouns.

Here's a sample of how this was done in an annual report:

People Excellence: We've established a high-performance culture throughout our company. Based on clear performance goals, this culture enables our people to realize their full potential. To increase our global talent pool, we're fostering talented young people worldwide. We've created new career tracks for experts and redesigned our management development program.

You will notice the writer used *we* and *our* instead of repeating the company name. In addition, the writer used contractions — *we've* and *we're* — to give the copy a conversational feel.

Another way to avoid robotic business writing is by being direct and using the word that's most important to your readers — *you*. The following examples show how much difference one word can make.

##### **Before**

- Our clients get a full spectrum of advertising-related services.
- Our clients get common sense advice that helps them grow their businesses.
- Our clients receive strategic and creative leadership across a full array of marketing communications.

## After

- You get a full spectrum of advertising-related services.
- You get common sense advice that helps you grow your business.
- You receive strategic and creative leadership across a full array of marketing communications.

One of the first rules in selling is to assume the sale. Writing *our clients* does not assume the sale, but writing *you* does.

## 5. Use active voice instead of passive voice in your business writing

Active voice is more direct and vigorous than passive voice. Here are two sentences that express the same ideas using active and passive voice:

**Passive voice:** Equipment repair and maintenance services are offered by our company.

**Active voice:** Our company offers equipment repair and maintenance services.

Even better, following the tip in point 4 above:

We offer equipment repair and maintenance services.

The passive voice sentence includes 10 words while the active voice sentence includes eight words. In this case, using active voice requires 20 per cent fewer words to say the same thing. So if you want to keep your message as short as possible, use the active voice.

## 6. Avoid corporate jargon and buzzwords in your business writing

Another hindrance to clear business writing is the use of jargon and corporate buzzwords. A few examples include:

- Actionable
- Best practice
- Buy-in
- Commoditise
- Deliverables
- Drill-down
- Drive (an initiative)
- Driver
- Incentivise
- Mindshare
- Mission-critical
- Operationalise
- Offline
- Paradigm shift
- Performance management
- Real-time
- Repurpose
- Scalable
- Space (as in sector)
- Scope (v.)
- Take to the next level
- Value proposition.

Jargon and buzzwords change over time and each year you will find new articles written about the most annoying words being used in the corporate world. In addition, you can find quite a few humorous websites that make fun of corporate jargon and buzzwords. One even automatically generates what it calls “corporate BS” phrases such as:

- Seamlessly repurpose standardised markets.
- Uniquely enable granular relationships.
- Appropriately re-intermediate out-of-the-box core competencies.
- Collaboratively extend wireless collaboration and idea-sharing.
- Rapidiously actualise user-centric methods of empowerment.

If you find yourself using this type of language in your business writing, it’s time to think of other words that will convey your message without sounding like a corporate robot.

## 7. Focus on the benefits, not the features, of your product or service

For persuasive business writing focus more on the benefits to the buyer instead of only emphasising the features of a product or service.

Here are two examples from Robert Bly’s *The Copywriter’s Handbook* that show how much difference this can make.

**Product-focused copy:** BankPlan is the state-of-the-art in user-friendly, sophisticated financial software for small business accounts receivable, accounts payable, and general ledger applications.

**Customer-focused copy:** BankPlan helps you balance your books and manage your cash flow. It also keeps track of customers who haven’t paid their bills. Best of all, the program is easy to use — you don’t need special training.

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**Product-focused copy:** The objective of the daily cash accumulation fund is to seek the maximum current income that is consistent with low capital risk and the maintenance of total liquidity.

**Customer-focused copy:** The cash fund gives you the maximum return on your investment dollar with the lowest risk. You can take out as much money as you like — whenever you like.

You will also notice that the customer-focused writing uses the word “you” several times while the product-focused copy does not address the reader at all.

## 8. Combine logic, emotion and credibility for more persuasive writing

Over 2,000 years ago, the Greek philosopher Aristotle described three essential elements persuasion: *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, which translate as credibility, emotion and logic. Let's look at how these can apply to your business writing.

### **Ethos — Credibility**

Credibility can be established in many ways in your business writing. Your website is a great place to establish your credibility. You can do this on your About Us page by showing your readers what you have achieved. This might be a list of satisfied clients, customer testimonials, projects you have completed successfully, industry or professional awards you have won, or profiles highlighting the skills and knowledge of your key personnel. Any of these will build your credibility and authority in the eyes of your readers.

### **Pathos — Emotion**

Many writers believe that pathos is the most important of the three. Emotion can be introduced in many direct or subtle ways.

If writing a case study about your product or service, for example, you can emphasise the frustration or discomfort that customers experienced before discovering your solution. If potential customers suffer from similar problems, they will connect with the emotional side of the case study.

Another example is an occupational health and safety television commercial by WorkSafe Victoria (Australia) which appealed to the emotions by showing us a workplace accident scene and then switching to a family waiting for the father to return from work. You're not sure if he's been hurt and you feel worried for the family. He returns safely in the end, but you get strong emotional reminder of the importance of maintaining safe work practices and environments.

### **Logos — Logic**

Whether you want people to buy your products or agree with your ideas, you need to use some form of logic or reasoning in your business writing.

If you're writing a brochure about your product, you can show how much time, money or effort it saves your customers. In many cases, you will want to use statistical data to support your claims. To be more credible it will help to have third-party confirmation – for example, from a customer or industry association.

A website of a major insurance provider points out that 80 per cent of Australians are underinsured and lists the source of the statistic as a survey conducted by a government agency. This fact will make readers think: "Am I one of the 80 per cent? It's likely that I am, and I need to do something about it to avoid serious problems." In this case, the statistical fact leads to an emotional response.

## Combining authority, emotion and reason in your business writing

Choosing the right mix of ethos, pathos and logos is the key to persuasive business writing. How you combine the three will depend on the product, the service or idea you're promoting, and your audience. Business managers, for example, often need to make a logical case for purchasing a new solution to a problem, so business-to-business products and services require a rational justification. Consumer products and services tend to be promoted on an emotional level. For example, if you're selling a relaxing holiday on the beach or expensive jewellery, you will want to focus on the emotional side of your offering.

## 9. Use verbs instead of nouns for more powerful business writing

Verbs give life to your writing and also reduce the total number of words required to say the same thing. Let's look at the following two examples:

We will work on the establishment of goals for the hiring, training and promotion of designated employees.

We will establish goals for hiring, training and promoting designated employees.

The first sentence has 17 words while the second one has 11 words. It might not seem like an important difference, but if you have limited space to convey your message, being wordy by using nouns instead of verbs will limit what you can say.

Using a noun with a verb when you can use a verb alone is called nominalisation. Here are a few examples of nominalisation and alternatives to avoid it:

<b>Nominalised phrase</b>	<b>Succinct revision</b>
Gave a report	Reported
Made a decision	Decided
Offered a suggestion	Suggested
Resulted in an increase	Increased
Issued an announcement	Announced
Led to the destruction of	Destroyed



## **10. Read your writing out loud once you have completed the draft**

This might sound a bit strange, but reading your writing out loud will uncover any awkward phrasing and shortcomings. In general, good writing is conversational and easy to read. When you read it aloud you will notice when your writing sounds unnatural or unrealistic. As you go through this process, mark up any parts that don't sound "right" and rewrite these in your second draft. Read the new draft and to determine whether your new version needs any additional changes.

**About the author:** Michael Gladkoff, Director of Word Nerds, has extensive experience in publishing, marketing, advertising and public relations. He began writing professionally in the mid-1980s and has written and edited over 3,000 persuasive documents and publications — including articles, brochures, company profiles, websites and speeches — for organisations in Australia, North America and Europe.