Ten Tips For Better Business Writing

The growing ubiquity of e-mail means that everyone in business, from lords of finance to programmers who dream in code, needs to write intelligently. By using simple, clear, precise language–and following a few other basic writing rules–you can become a better communicator and improve the prospects for your career.

"Clarity is the most important characteristic of good business writing," says Mignon Fogarty, creator of the "Grammar Girl Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing" podcast. "Often businesspeople will use big $10 words because they want to sound intelligent. Instead, they end up sounding like they're trying too hard."

Start by using short, declarative sentences. Never use a long word where a short one will do. (No need to write "utilize" when "use" works just as well.) Be ruthless about self-editing; if you don't need a word, cut it.

Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or any kind of jargon if you can think of an English equivalent. Regardless of how many times your managers ask you to "circle back," or "move the needle forward," take a stance against painful business jargon. These expressions may sound important–and like the official language of a club you'd like to join–but they make no sense.

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1) When you're composing an e-mail, say what you need to say, and move on. If your big idea isn't in the first paragraph, move it there. If you can't find it, rewrite.

2) "Simplicity doesn't mean simplicity of thought," says Kara Blackburn, a lecturer in managerial communication at MIT Sloan School of Management. "Start by asking yourself what you want the person to do as a result of this e-mail. Just asking yourself that question can make your communication much clearer."

3) Use plain English, and be specific. Instead of mentioning "the current situation," explain exactly what it is, whether it's low company morale, or an SEC investigation.

4) Curb your enthusiasm. Avoid overusing exclamation points, regardless of how energized or friendly you might feel. Choose professional sign-offs like "Best" and "Regards" over the too-cute "xoxo."

5) Whenever possible, use active verbs instead of passive verbs. Active verbs help to energize your prose. Instead of writing "The meeting was led by Tom," write: "Tom led the meeting." Use a straightforward sentence structure–subject, verb, object–that people can read quickly.

6) Choose pronouns wisely, and don't be afraid to use "me." "I often read versions of 'Send the memo to Bob and myself,'" says Fogarty. "For some reason people think that 'myself' sounds more important or formal." To avoid this mistake, Forgarty recommends thinking about how you would say the sentence if you removed mentions of other people.

"Send the memo to me" sounds correct. If you add "Bob" to that clause, the "me" pronoun still works.

7) Beware of common grammatical mistakes, like subject-verb agreement. The number of the subject (whether it's singular or plural) determines the number of the verb. Use a singular verb form after nobody, someone, everybody, neither, everyone, each and either.

8) Know when to use "that" and "which." "That" introduces essential information in what's called a "restrictive clause." "Which" introduces extra information in a "nonrestrictive clause." Here's an example: "I'm interested in speaking with you about our new product, which has the potential to increase sales." The second clause provides extra information, and it isn't essential to the first clause.

9) Therefore, "which" is correct. In a sentence such as "Computers are the only products that we sell," the clause "that we sell" is essential to the meaning of the sentence, so the correct word is "that." You can't remove the "that" clause without changing the meaning of the sentence.

10) Another common error is confusing "affect" and "effect." Affect is a verb meaning "to influence." "Effect" is a noun that means "result." The weather affects our ability to travel, and it had a terrible *effect* on my flight to New York.

For more writing tips, consult the classic books on writing and grammar, such as *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk and E.B. White, *The Associated Press Stylebook* and *The Chicago Manual of Style*. On iTunes, download the "Grammar Girl Quick and Dirty Tips for Better Writing" podcast. Happy writing.

* http://www.forbes.com/2010/05/03/better-business-writing-leadership-careers-tips.html