

In Other Words

The writing workshop in a box (your inbox!)



Association for Creative Business Writing

Your mentor for business writing that rocks!



This issue, we explore ways to add polish and pizzazz to your business writing--from big ideas to accurate punctuation.

Please let me know if you have any questions. Just write me at

director@afcbw.com

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Encouraging Words

Creative Techniques to Help You Stand Out

"I've never thought of business writing as creative," a smartly dressed businesswoman said to me over coffee. "I'm not sure what you mean."

For a moment, I was at a loss for words (an uncommon occurrence!). I knew when I included the word "creative" in the association's name I would make a few synapses smoke, but her response still surprised me. Why would we purposely exclude creativity from any part of our lives? And especially our businesses?



I learned that she was a technical person, and to her, writing was just something you did to get the facts across, not unlike someone with faulty taste buds who eats just to stay alive. And I've talked to plenty of techies who like it that way. But

what about their audiences? I know plenty of people who roll their eyes when asked what it's like to read that stuff. (I also know a lot of them delete that kind of writing, so what's the point?)

I made a conscious decision to include creativity in the association's name because it's the best way I know to enliven our workaday lives. A little spark of creativity takes our writing from ho-hum to how-about-that! We better communicate our message, we engage audiences, and we brighten our days. In the process, we stand out from the pack.

H.R. 946, the **Plain Writing Act of 2010**, was sent to President Obama on Oct. 1, 2010; he signed it into law on Oct. 13, 2010!

Yea!

What do we have to look forward to?

One year from now, all documents relating to any federal benefit or service must have "*writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience.*" (This includes all those torturous tax-filing documents!)

It's not the first time the government has tried to clean up its writing act. During the Clinton administration, officials issued "No Gobbledygook Awards" to agencies that rewrote their copy in good old plain English. (Based on the writing I've seen lately, they didn't give many of those awards!)

Unfortunately, this new act has no penalties for agencies that continue to write bureaucratese. But, still, it's a step in the right direction.

The word "creativity" is emotionally charged for some people. As I write in *Words at Work*:

"That word--creativity--causes a lot of people a lot of problems. The mere mention of it makes them freeze, something like panic flashing in their eyes. 'Oh, I'm not creative,' they say, quick to clear up that misunderstanding, just in case I thought they were capable of writing something more interesting. But, I'm not talking about creativity like a giant jolt of electricity that lights up our lives once in a while (though that's great, too). I'm talking about a steady current that feeds us daily. The juice that inspires us to write a successful sales proposal, a persuasive proposal, or an interesting blog." (Page 40.)

In the weeks ahead, we'll delve into simple ways we can bring more creativity into our business (or any) writing. Here are a few suggestions to get you started.

1. Read the "Week in Review" section in the Sunday New York Times.

(Online at www.nytimes.com.)

Not only will you keep current with news and opinions, the outstanding writing will energize your own writing in the week

ahead. For example, last year Thomas Friedman started his column with a dateline 2012. He wrote a paragraph (set in italics) about a scenario he hopes we'll see in Afghanistan. Then he wrote (now in regular text) what we have to do to make that a reality. This is your basic "what if" approach, which can enliven reports, proposals, Web copy, even memos. Try it when you want people to think bigger. Or when you want to scare them about thinking too small. In that same section of the paper, I also saw a political cartoon that used that famous line from the used-car industry--"*What would it take to put you in...*"--in a fresh way. It sparked my creativity and reminded me to have a little more fun with business writing (when appropriate).



2. Tie your articles, reports, whatever you write, to current events.

"Week in Review" not only illustrates great writing techniques but keeps you up on the news. When you can, write about how your subject relates to what's going on in our world. Is it in synch with or in opposition to a current trend? Does it offer a solution?

Find 'N' Fix

These sentences are headed in the wrong direction. Use your GPS--grammar, punctuation, and style--to turn them around.

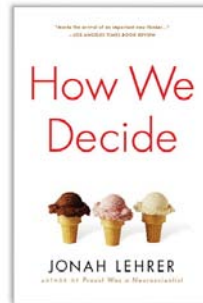
- 1.** The small copier, only measuring 9 inches, works like a big machine.
- 2.** After weeks of writing, editing, and mistake correction, the report was finally ready to be sent out.

Editing for Success

How would you improve this paragraph? (No one right answer--there are dozens of ways to make it better.) Keep in mind concepts such as too much information, WIIFM (What's in it for me? Words at Work, page 94), and clear and concise writing (page 121).

The project we are proposing is based on an excellent idea developed in Canada from October through December during 2001. The first person to realize the potential of this project is no longer with the project, but we are moving forward to expand those ideas and leverage the talent base we already

3. Read Jonah Lehrer's book, *How We Decide*.



The information he shares about how our brains work is fascinating and his style of writing is scintillating. Similes, comparisons, stories, parenthetical comments--all of these help take complex issues and make them compelling and easy to understand. I usually reserve my bedtime reading for fiction, but **How**

We Decide is so exciting, I've been reading it instead. It reminded me, too, how I can get a little lazy with my own writing. Lehrer inspires me to work harder at expressing something more creatively.

4. Tell tales. I love telling stories. They add so much: real-life experiences with your product, proof positive that your service truly helps people, examples of how something has benefited others. Here's what Sam Horn, author of POP, has to say about stories: "[A story] *takes people out of their critical left brain and switches them into their emotionally engaged right brain. They are no longer on the outside judging your idea; they are inside experiencing it. That's the essence of buy-in.*" (Page 174.)

5. Observe. Remove those ear buds, take the bus, walk instead of drive, hang out where people buy your product, listen in the lunchroom, eavesdrop at cafés, go to a big-city library, pay attention. That's how you get the stories to write about.

6. Write them down. Oh, the great ideas I've lost just because I was sure I'd remember them! Record them on your cell phone, carry slips of paper, or buy yourself a beautiful, small (and refillable) notebook. Don't assume you'll remember.

7. Think like your audience. Get out of your own way and get into the minds of your audience. If you're writing to your support staff, make sure you know what they're thinking, not what you *want* them to think. If you're writing to clients, do a survey to get on their wave length. If you're writing to potential customers, try to get

have in existence. In the event we are funded, we are proposing to conduct a research project into the effect of frozen fish on the digestive tracts of elephant seals along with high school students from the Yukon Territory. Funding for a lead scientist will allow us to better utilize the local talent we will draw on.

Answers to Find 'N' Fix

1. Before

The small copier, only measuring 9 inches, works like a big machine.

Comments

*"Only" is often misplaced. It goes in front of what it's modifying, in this case "nine."

* Numbers less than 10 are traditionally spelled out.

Exceptions:

- a. Measurements.
- b. Fractions.
- c. Temperature degrees.
- d. Money with \$ sign.
- e. Consistency in the same sentence; e.g., *The teacher offered both 9- and 12-week courses.* (It would be odd to have nine spelled out.)

After

The small copier--measuring only nine inches wide--worked like a large

back to beginner mind--where their minds are--and write to them from that perspective.

We'll go over each of these in detail in future issues, but I wanted you to see some of the easy things you can start doing today to set yourself apart. Give them a try, and let me know how they work for you.

Communicator's Column: Twelve Pointers on Punctuation

Punctuation is like jewelry. If your pin is on crooked, you'll still make your statement (though it's a bit tarnished). Same with writing with faulty punctuation. People will get your point, but they'll notice you didn't get it quite right.

Punctuation marks are like road signs that help your readers know where you're headed. Without them, they could get frustrated and give up on following you.



I see a lot of punctuation errors in my work. Bookstores and libraries are packed with books on the subject, but here's the "CliffsNotes" version for quick reference. Get familiar with these important punctuation rules, and keep this list handy.



1. Commas you *want* to use:

Separate series of words, phrases, or clauses.

This book contains tips, tools, and techniques. (Note: depending on the style you follow, the second comma is optional.)

Set off independent clauses (complete sentences) joined by a conjunction (e.g., *and*, *or*, *but*).

We studied the book, and we wrote much better.

Set off transitional and parenthetical clauses.

Furthermore, this book, packed full of tips, helps the

machine.

2. Before

After weeks of writing, editing, and mistake correction, the report was finally ready to be sent out.

Comments

* Parallelism. You want all your lists and series to be "parallel," which means the list/series items are all nouns, adjectives, or verbs. In this case, I made the list all gerunds (writing, editing, proofing).

* Misplaced modifier. The report wasn't writing and editing itself, though I sure wish they would!

* Passive voice. "the report was ready to be sent out" is passive. Much better to have someone or something doing the work. *"out" is an unnecessary preposition.

After

After weeks of writing, editing, and proofing, our manager was ready to send the report.

One Way to Improve Editing for Success

Before

The project we are proposing is based on an excellent idea developed in Canada from October through December during 2001. The first person to realize the potential of this

grammatically challenged.

Introduce quotes.

John said, "This is very helpful."

2. Commas you *don't* want to use:

Between compound dependent clauses (second clause is an incomplete sentence).

The book is available on the Web and sold at stores.

With a restrictive clause essential to the meaning.

The book that is on the Web site is the same as the printed book.

3. Periods:

Designate the end of sentences and used after most abbreviations.

Mr. Smith bought the book, which he proclaimed as "terrific."



4. Semicolons:

Use between complete sentences when there is no conjunction.

The book was helpful; it filled a real need for the staff.

Use between items in a series that includes internal commas:

We bought the books, which were very informative; a ream of paper, which should last a few weeks; and a copier, which was very expensive.

5. Colons:

Use after the salutation in a formal letter. Use to introduce lists or series.

Dear Mr. Smith:

We have sent you the books you ordered: Words at Work, Letters to the Editors, and Brain Dump 101.

6. Apostrophes:

project is no longer with the project, but we are moving forward to expand those ideas and leverage the talent base we already have in existence. In the event we are funded, we are proposing to conduct a research project into the effect of frozen fish on the digestive tracts of elephant seals along with high school students from the Yukon Territory. Funding for a lead scientist will allow us to better utilize the local talent we will draw on.

Comments

1. Too much information throughout.
2. The order of information is out of whack. The readers need to know why this should matter to them.
3. The need for a lead scientist was buried in the first version. In the "after" version, that information is introduced as soon as it made sense to the reader.
4. This reads as though the seals were eating high school students!

After

Elephant seals love fish. But what about frozen fish? Earlier this century, Canadian researchers found evidence that a frozen diet was affecting the seals' digestion. As we develop our year-long

Use with contractions and possessives. Do not use with plural numerals or plural acronyms.

Mr. Smith's employees didn't have access to PPOs in the 1990s.



7. Quotation marks:

Use double marks to surround direct quotations and short excerpts from books and poems. Use single marks for a quote within a quote.

"I didn't know she was going to yell 'Fire!' at the theater," he exclaimed.

Punctuation and quotation marks: Periods and commas *always* go inside. Colon and semicolons go outside. Question marks and exclamation points go inside the quotation marks when they relate to the quote.

He was a fan of "the Sopranos"; he'd seen every episode six times.

After dinner, Contessa asked, "May we lick our plates?"

Exception: When the sentence as a whole requires the question mark or exclamation point, not the quote within the sentence.

How can Robert say, "I won't follow the rules!"?

8. Exclamation points:

Designates the exceptional. Use judiciously!



9. Hyphens:

Connect compound words used as nouns and adjectives.

The sleek-coated dog had a set-to with the one-eyed cat.

10. Dashes:

Set off parenthetical thoughts or explanatory phrases.

He knew what he wanted to eat--steak and fries--but his tight waistband convinced him to order tofu.

11. Parentheses:

research project in the Yukon Territory to study these effects, funding for a lead scientist would help us to better coordinate the efforts of our staff. In addition, this lead scientist would allow us to reach out to high school students from the Yukon Territory to involve them in the ecology of their homeland.

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Enclose additional comments and explanations.

This book (though only 46 pages) makes grammar a bit easier.

12. Ellipses:

Three periods in a row fill in for missing words.

For example, if the following sentence had a longer description of the supervisor, it could be shortened like this:

The supervisor ... told the staff to take the rest of the day off.

When you condense a direct quote, use ellipses in place of the words you left out.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke on August 28, 1963, " ... I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'"

Creative business writing compels readers to stick with you from start to finish. Punctuation helps to seamlessly guide them along the way.

Writing with a Full Deck

I've been writing for more than a couple of decades, and I still need motivation to keep my writing flowing. Upcoming motivational cards include:

- Interloping prepositions
- Misplaced modifiers
- Story inventory
- Daydreams

Look for the card every Monday and try to use the concepts throughout the week. Let me know if you have any questions as you focus on each of them. This feature builds the foundation for stronger writing. The process of improving writing is gradual.



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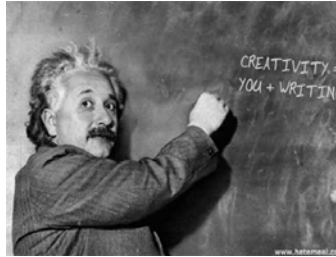
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Creative Challenge



Over the next couple of weeks, keep an eye out for writing that excites you. Make a list of the approaches and styles you admire. While you're at it, pay attention to writing that bores you. Why is it uninviting? How would you

fix it? Keep a list of these creative ideas and solutions. Before you know it, they'll be a regular part of your writing repertoire.

Remember, your words are your wardrobe at work. Dress for success!

All the best,

Lynda McDaniel
Director

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Our members have agreed not to forward these newsletters.

Many thanks to www.ImageGenerator.org for the use of the customizable Einstein photograph.

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