

Do your writing skills add up?

Communications expert Fiona Talbot offers her advice on business writing in a finance environment



Inefficient workplace communication costs businesses billions of pounds per year. There's a tangible cost for every unclear message and mistake that's sent.

Put it this way: business writing mistakes (which include spelling and punctuation mistakes and unclear or confusing and other user-unfriendly messages) can = lost profits + lost sales / custom + loss of professionalism + lost goodwill. It becomes patently clear that no one can actually afford to get their communication wrong.

The good news is there are always solutions for every problem. Avoidance is one of the best, as I show at www.wordpowerskills.com – and here are some tips to help you get started.

General tips

Writing in the workplace is not the same as academic writing. Plain English is a must for businesses today. You may have to ditch complex vocabulary and dissertation style – which may be exactly fit for purpose at college but not for a business readership. AAT students who have completed a Unit 10 assessment know that, nowadays, reports have to be presented in the style of a business document. What matters is accessible language and a clear layout.

Use your computer's spell and grammar check or use a good dictionary before sending your written document. If you use English in international business, be

aware it may be used differently by non-native users. Use the appropriate version of English in your writing, eg UK English.

Be one step ahead by expecting your writing to be wrong! Put another way: you wouldn't take a chance that your calculations were wrong, would you? Of course, you'd double-check them before sending. Well, do that with your writing – and check for meaning, too. Mistakes in communication can be as much about misunderstandings as about the wrong information.

It's a strength, not a weakness, to ask if you're not sure. Remove problems at

source. If you need support, ask for it (and managers: make sure you provide it).

If your readers are your customers, don't assume they'll be interested in what you write. Design your writing so they want to read it – or at least know why they should. Breaking down chunks of text into bite-sized portions – with interesting captions – can make all the difference between boring and engaging a reader.

Make sure your writing adds up – not just from your own but from your readers' perspective as well. Think of what you write as a story line that keeps people in the loop.

Adopt the right tone. Most complaints about business writing are about poor tone (particularly emails).

Be systematic in your approach. Writing is much easier if you plan your structure. I teach an easy-to-use, four-step system that works like this. Check your writing:

- is correct
- is clear
- makes impact
- is reader-focused

If you get the structure right, your readers will find and understand your main points. You'll find the system works well, not just in lengthy reports but also in everything you write. Specific checklists are also included in my *Better Business English* book series (see box below).

Writing for finance professionals

Wrong punctuation and grammar may attract more criticism in an accountancy environment than in the world at large. It's because finance professionals understandably focus on details. Trained to pick up on mistakes, they'll be vocal about them. By getting something wrong, you can be unintentionally undermining your professional credibility in their and your other readers' eyes. It may seem harsh but it happens.

Make sure the relevant points are there in all your writing and that they are accurate. You'll impress finance professionals only if you mention the points they're looking for and they're right.

'Business writing mistakes (which include spelling and punctuation mistakes and unclear or confusing and other user-unfriendly messages) can = lost profits + lost sales / custom + loss of professionalism + lost goodwill'

When you write (whether it's a report, letter, presentation, email etc) ensure you can back it up with facts, if questioned. You may think once you've written your report, for example, your work is done. In fact, the written word is often evaluated by secondary and tertiary readers quite a time later. Everything needs to make sense some time down the line, possibly when you're not there to explain it.

Know your sources, structure the way you set them out – and reference them.

You understand the notion of an audit trail and it's an important concept when talking about good business writing. Everything should be written in a professional, structured way for a demonstrable business purpose. Let readers see each piece of writing leads where you and they need it to lead. You'll impress your target audience when you have researched your facts and referenced your sources. If they need to validate the points or simply know more, you enable them to do just that.

Writing for non-finance professionals

Don't presume your non-finance target audience understands the subject. See

things from their perspective. Give the right information clearly and simply, giving some explanatory background if necessary.

Avoid jargon. Don't assume your readers understand terms that are second nature to you. Not only may you confuse them but you may irritate them as well. Give a glossary of terms if you feel it's needed.

Less can be more... up to a point.

Although information overload is never welcome, do give enough information when you write. Readers need to understand the purpose of your writing – and 'what's in it for them', what they must do (if anything) and by when.

If your report or other writing has to be lengthy, consider summarising it in bullet points at the front. Or try attaching an appendix or links – so that readers can access further details.

Fiona Talbot is a business author, consultant, plain English adviser and trainer at TQI Word Power Skills. For more information, visit www.wordpowerskills.com



Reader offer

Fiona Talbot's *The Better Business English* series, (published internationally by Kogan Page) gives tips and case studies on how to use business English for home and global success. The three books in the series (*How to Write Effective Business English*, *Make an Impact with Your Written English*, *Executive Writing Skills for Managers*) align with the three stages in the business cycle, to help people write successfully throughout each stage of their career. The books are available singly or as a set for office reference.

Kogan Page is offering *Accounting Technician* readers the special price of £6.39 per book (RRP £7.99). To order, email ukmarketing@koganpage.com and quote TALBOT0710 for an order form – or contact Fiona Talbot via her website at www.wordpowerskills.com