

## Chapter 1

# Make Writing Your Not-So-Secret Weapon

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Rising above the pack with good writing
- ▶ Accepting that you can write much better than you now do
- ▶ Applying a planning structure to everything you write
- ▶ Writing successfully for print, online and spoken media
- ▶ Crossing borders with globalized business English

**G**ood writing can change your life. Does that sound like an extreme, even ridiculous, statement? Maybe, but I believe it.

In this digital communication age, most opportunities come to you through writing. You need letters and résumés to get jobs. You need proposals to earn buy-in, marketing material to sell, and reports to show what you accomplished – and get promoted.

You need websites, blogs, and social media to reach beyond your geographic territory and personal ability to be wherever you need to be. You may want to script yourself for speeches, video, and even important conversations. And most of all, you need to be part of the everyday global communication fabric of email, texting, and perhaps tweeting.

Good writing is one of the most powerful weapons you can add to your career arsenal. It can make a big difference in the personal side of your life too, enabling you to stand out

in a host of competitive situations. To speak from my own experience, I came out ahead in competing for a desirable apartment, obtained refunds when a purchase or service disappointed me, and even avoided a traffic ticket once – all by writing good letters.

Writing is a major tool for achieving what you want. As with every facet of business today, just showing up isn't good enough anymore. The competition is simply too vast to turn out adequate, ordinary writing and hope to succeed.

Consider these statistics:

- ✓ 100 billion business emails sent daily
- ✓ 200 million active Twitter users, 400 million tweets per day sent
- ✓ 634 million websites
- ✓ 200 million blogs

Of course, you're not competing with all of them or reading every one. But people nowadays are extremely selective about what they choose to read because they have so many options. See the sidebar 'Communication in perspective' for an even more expansive view of these trends.



From a writer's viewpoint, you no longer have a captive audience. Getting your messages read is a challenge in itself. Getting them acted upon demands writing that is not only good, but also strategic.

What is *strategic writing*? Simply, planned communication that achieves a set of goals. The good news is that to write strategically you need only add a mindset and set of writing techniques to what you know.

Following are some of the things you already know.

- ✓ **Your subject:** You've invested in your field and are knowledgeable about it
- ✓ **Your audience:** They may be people you work with, colleagues, prospective employers, or a target market
- ✓ **Your goal:** You know what you want – now and further down the line.

## Communication in perspective

Once upon a time (but less than 600 years ago), writing and reading were the domains of the privileged elite. So was travel, which meant that few people could extend their personal networks beyond the places where they found themselves.

Then came the movable type printing press. Almost overnight, many more people could read, learn, and in some cases, circulate their own ideas, research, and thinking far beyond their own locations. Material of course had to be printed and physically distributed in the form of books, magazines, newspapers, and all the

rest. For the past five centuries, this didn't seem like much of a limit.

But leapfrog to the 21st century. Thanks to digital communication and the Internet, everyone with access to basic systems and equipment can communicate with anyone, anywhere, as instantly as she wishes. You're limited only by your imagination and capabilities. Now everyone can be his or her own author, editor, critic, publisher, *and* distributor.

The opportunities for individuals and organizations of every kind are nearly overwhelming.

Here are some of the things you may *not* know yet – that this book shows you:

- ✓ How to capture and retain reader attention
- ✓ How to make people care about your message
- ✓ How to select the right content to make your case
- ✓ How to use writing techniques that make your material persuasive and convincing
- ✓ How to use every single thing you write to build relationships and advance your cause
- ✓ How to sharpen your ear and eye so you can spot your own writing problems and fix them

This chapter highlights the core elements of good business writing and points you in specific directions to solve your most pressing communication challenges. It introduces an audience-plus-goal structure that makes all your writing easier, more effective, and more fun.

## Planning and Structuring Every Message

Faced with a blank page and something to accomplish, many people freeze at the first question: where do I start? The answer? Start with what you know – your audience, your goal, and your subject. However, you need to think about all these things more systematically than you ordinarily may.



Your over-arching goal is usually more far-reaching and complex than your immediate reason for writing. And you must analyze your audience in depth to tease out the factors that tell you your best approach. Then you can translate what you know about the subject into content that supports your message.

For example, suppose you want to ask your supervisor for a plum assignment you see on the horizon. You can simply write:

*Jane, I'd like to present myself as a candidate for the lead role on the Crystal Project. You know my work and qualifications. I'll really appreciate the opportunity, and I'll do a great job. Thanks. – Jake*

This is maybe okay – clear, no obvious errors – but definitely not compelling. All Jane knows from the message is that Jake wants the opportunity and thinks he's qualified.

Jake would fare better if he first looked at his own goals in more depth. Perhaps he wants a chance to:

*Exercise more responsibility*

*Show off his capabilities and be noticed*

*Expand his know-how in regard to the project's subject*

*Add a management credential to his résumé*

But he also has the longer term to consider. Jake almost certainly will find it useful to:

*Strengthen his position for future special assignments*

*Remind his boss of his good track record*

*Build his image as a capable, reliable, resourceful leader*

*Build toward a promotion or higher-level job in his current organization or elsewhere*

From this vantage point, Jake can see the pitch itself as a building block for his overall career ambitions, which calls for a better message than the perfunctory one he dashed off. He must think through the actual assignment demands and how his skills match up. Then there's Jane to consider. What qualifications does she, the decision-maker, most value? What does she care about?

After some thought, Jake may come up with a list like this:

**Job requires:** *planning skills; ability to meet deadlines; knowledge of XYZ systems; experience in intra-departmental coordination; good judgment under pressure*

**Jane values:** *collaborative teaming; people skills; department reputation; effective presentation. She is weak in systems planning and insecure with technology.*

This bit of brainstorming helps Jake produce a blueprint for persuasive content. His email can briefly cite his proven track record in terms of the job requirements; his ability to deliver results as a team leader; his awareness that success will enhance the department's reputation, and that he'll use his excellent presentation skills to ensure this result.

The weaknesses he pinpointed for Jane give Jake another avenue for presenting himself as the best choice. He can suggest a planning system he'll use to make the most of staff resources and/or a specific way to incorporate new easy-to-use technology. These aspects of his message are very likely to hook Jane's attention.

All Jake's points must be true, needless to say. I don't suggest ever making up credentials, but rather, that you take the trouble to communicate the best of what is real.



Further, never assume people understand your capabilities or remember your achievements, even if you work closely with the person you're communicating with. *Other people don't have time to put you in perspective. That's why doing it yourself has such power.*

Even if Jake doesn't get the assignment, writing a good memo contributes to his long-range goals of presenting himself as ready, willing, and able to take on new challenges and to be seen as more valuable.



The beauty of using this audience-plus-goal structure to plan your messages, whether they're emails or proposals or anything in between, is how far the effort takes you to the real heart of good writing – real and relevant substance. Writing is not a system for manipulating words, nor does it camouflage a lack of thought. Good writing is good thinking presented clearly, concisely, and transparently.

I make you a rash promise: for every fraction you improve your writing, you improve your thinking along with it.



Chapter 2 gives you an in-depth demonstration of this planning structure and shows you how to translate it into successful messages. While you may pick and choose which sections of the book to read, and draw upon them at need, I encourage you to invest in Chapter 2. It gives you the entire foundation for deciding *what* to say in any circumstance.

The other essential groundwork for successful writing is *how* to say what you want. This is writing's technical side, which I cover in Chapters 3, 4 and 5. If you're afraid that I'll ask you to dig out your old high school textbook or memorize grammar rules, no worries. I provide a set of commonsense techniques so that you can identify problems and then fix them.



One central technique to quickly upgrade anything you write is the *say-it-aloud diagnosis*. When you read your own copy aloud (or whisper it to yourself if you're not alone), you get immediate signals that something isn't working or can work better. You may be forcing your sentences into a sing-song rhythm that denotes awkward construction, unnecessary words, and too-long sentences. You may hear repetitive sounds or inappropriate pauses demanded by poor punctuation. You can easily fix all these problems, and many more, when you use this technique to find clues to better writing.

Chapters 3 through 5 give you a host of down-to-earth strategies for monitoring your own work and improving it. These include computer resources like Word's easy-to-use and much-underutilized Readability Index, which provides helpful guidance for making your writing clear.

No matter where you now see yourself on the writing spectrum, you always have room to improve. Most of the professional writers I know, whether they're journalists, corporate communicators, or public relations specialists, are obsessive with discovering and developing better ways to write. They want to write material that's ever more interesting, persuasive, and engaging.



For people inhabiting any part of the business and non-profit worlds, the rewards of better writing are often immediate. Your emails and letters get the results you want much more often. Your proposals are more seriously considered. People accord you more respect. And you move toward your goals faster.

You also find yourself actively building relationships that benefit you over the long run. If a negative relationship hampers you at work, the structured thinking I show you in Chapter 2 even provides a tool for turning that relationship around.



## Yes, you can write better!

If good writing is a skill that can be acquired – and I say it can! – you may wonder why you don't currently write as well as you'd like. You already learned to write in school, right?

Actually, few people did. Unless you were very lucky and ran across an unusual teacher, the people who taught you to write never worked on practical writing themselves. Unlike the business world, the academic system is not geared to getting things done but rather to thinking about them. Writing for school is mostly aimed at demonstrating your knowledge of what you've been taught, or contributing to the store of human knowledge. Academia traditionally rewards dense, complicated, convoluted writing full of expensive words.

Business writing, on the other hand, always has a goal and is geared toward action. And whatever the goal, it is always best accomplished by being accessible, direct, clear, concrete, and simple. What you write should be conversational as well as engaging and persuasive.

Emulating 19th-century writing traditions in your work makes little sense, and striving to produce empty, cliché-ridden 21st-century business writing is just a recipe for boring your readers. Even though no one wants to read or believe them, these styles of writing surround us. That's why your good writing gives you a major competitive advantage.

## *Applying Audience-Plus-Goal Strategy to Any Business Need*

Beginning with Chapter 6, *Business Writing For Dummies* shows you how to use planning and writing strategies to meet all your writing challenges. I progressively cover the various communication vehicles available to you today.

### *Impressing with email, letters, and business documents*

Email is the most-used medium for many people, and in many ways the most basic, so it's a natural starting point.

Don't underestimate the importance or overall impact of email. This everyday workhorse offers an extraordinary opportunity to build your reputation and image, incrementally. You can actually decide how you want to be perceived: Confident? Creative? Inventive? Responsible? Steady? An idea source? Problem-solver? Make up your own list and write from inside this persona, using what you know and all your best writing techniques.



Audience analysis pays off hugely with email. Understanding the person who reads your message shows you how to ask for what you want, whether you're requesting an opportunity, inviting the reader to a meeting, or pitching for a new piece of equipment. Even further, knowing your audience in depth enables you to anticipate your reader's response and build in answers to objections she's apt to raise.

Framing the right content at the intersection of goal and audience works equally well for business correspondence, networking messages, cover letters, and more, as you find in Chapter 7. You may be surprised to see that the same principles also give you the foundation for long-form materials that often feel like make-or-break opportunities: proposals, reports, and executive summaries – all covered in Chapter 8.



## *Using stories and value propositions*

Chapter 9 takes you into new territory by showing you how to work with two staples of contemporary communication. One is the *selling proposition* or *core value*, a concise statement used by businesses and non-profits to communicate what distinguishes them from competitors. The second is *storytelling*, the oldest human connector of all.

While the business world embraces both tools widely, they can be difficult to use without direction from professional communicators. But small- and medium-size businesses can profit from both core value statements and stories. The creation process channels productive thinking and defines an organization's true strengths. Working with these concepts, using the structure I present, gives you a more solid basis for all communication.



Less widely recognized is how *individuals* can use value statements. Job-hunting is easier when you can clearly convey your uniqueness. Justifying your position or presenting yourself for more responsibility or promotion rests on ready-made ground. And in general, when you can speak for yourself – or your department, profession, or company – you possess an asset that translates into personal success.

Chapter 9 gives you practical guidelines to identify both core value and good stories, and shows you how to craft them to deliver magnetic messages.

## *Writing the spoken word*

Knowing your value and story can help you work magic when you need to deliver your material live, whether in a 15-second 'elevator speech' that introduces you to people you want to know, or as part of a substantial talk or presentation. Chapter 10 shows you how to write for the spoken word.

The same planning process (Chapter 2) works for presentations, just as it does for emails, reports, proposals, and all the rest. Start by understanding your goal – what you want people to do as a result of listening to you – and analyzing your

audience. The technical guidelines are similar to those for print, too, just more extreme: aim for even simpler and clearer language based on short, everyday words that you can speak naturally and easily.



Don't be distracted – or let your audience be distracted – by presentation systems such as PowerPoint. Shape your thoughts in writing first, not to suit a limited format, and keep the focus on yourself.

These ideas apply to scripting your own video, too. And for every occasion when you must prepare to think on your feet, use the technique of politicians and CEOs alike: write talking points for yourself.

## ***Writing online: From website to blog to tweet***

Digital media seem so revolutionary that people often assume they can toss all the old writing rules out the virtual window. Don't do it! True, some aspects generate change: the delivery speed and reach of online messages shifts basic concepts of how people communicate. The traditional top-down method, whereby authoritative figures issue 'the word', is eroding quickly. Now everyone can be a journalist, commentator or contributor. Nevertheless, the need to write well holds steady.



Huge numbers of websites, blogs, and tweets are tossed into extremely competitive arenas. Only the well-thought-out and written ones succeed. Abbreviate all you want with texting and instant messaging (provided you know your audience can follow you), but don't introduce it into other media. Write blogs and posts with bad grammar and spelling, and you lose credibility. Fail to plan your website from the audience's perspective and you don't draw an audience at all.

Chapters 11 and 12 give you the writing know-how you need to communicate in today's digital world.

The online world is the great leveler. Never before has there been so much opportunity for individuals, or small enterprises, to make an impact. Equip yourself to do it effectively and the world may be yours.



Unlike print media and even email, a blog or website isn't personally delivered to someone who then chooses whether or not to read it. You must craft online media to pull in the readers you want. So defining your audience and goals first is at least as important as for any other writing project.

Guidelines for online writing are not radically different from those for print, but they are more intense. Sentences may be as short as a single word, and, generally, no longer than 14. Information must be more concise, crystallizing central ideas into pithy statements with zing. Plus, digital media introduce new demands that center on interactivity. You want people to respond and spread the word, and these goals require targeted techniques.

As you read this, new technologies are no doubt emerging to dazzle and intrigue us. Digital media seems to evolve almost as fast as computer speed. But the newest technology is basically one more delivery system for your messages. I guarantee you still need good writing to succeed and that the techniques presented in this book apply more than ever.

## *Globalizing business English*

The world may be happy to communicate with you in English. After all, it is now entrenched as the essential language of international business.



But that doesn't mean everyone is on the same wavelength. Every country and culture has distinct values and perspectives. In many parts of the world, for example, work takes second place to family and leisure interests, a viewpoint that some work-obsessed cultures find hard to understand. A number of cultures value courtesy more than efficiency, and do not transact business unless you establish a solid relationship first.

In many cultures, you can't open a conversation unless you're able to cite a personal connection. And in some places, directness is not appreciated. Many cultures never voice an outright 'no', so you must interpret polite comments to figure out whether you're being rejected. You also benefit from developing the ability to be similarly indirect with others.

Writing may be the best way to initiate contact with people you don't know. However, you must remember that many people speak and write English only as a second – or third or fourth – language.

Fortunately, the basic guidelines in Chapter 13 go a long way toward helping you write messages in a way most non-native speakers anywhere can easily understand. In Chapter 14, I present specific suggestions for writing to businesspeople in eight different countries. I collected the insights directly from people who live or work in each country.

I recommend reading through Part IV even if you have no immediate plan to expand your business overseas. The differences among seemingly similar countries and English speakers are fascinating. Moreover, it's a rare organization today that doesn't need to communicate with non-native English speakers who may be employees, customers or partners.



We all see the world through our own filters, unconsciously constructed of personal experience, cultural values and everything else we grow up with. Glimpsing life through other filters helps you know yourself better.