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Chapter **1**

Making Writing Your Weapon for Success

We take the ability to read and write for granted today, but human civilization started with, and depends on, the written word. Originating more than 5,000 years ago, writing empowered people to record events and share information with people beyond shouting distance. Over time it enabled us to collectively build knowledge and experience. We could think bigger thoughts and invent better ways of doing things.

For most of the time between early writing and the world we live in, writing skills were typically owned by the governing classes. A mere 50 centuries later, we can all own this magic. And as we know from Superman and his friends, when you own a power, you need to use it to accomplish great things.

But good writing is not an innate skill for most of us. It is definitely a learnable skill, but one that few people develop in school. Even if we got good marks, the academic writing we struggled with is very different from the practical writing we need for everyday and work purposes. This book shows you what this kind of writing looks like: how to do it, how to use it and how improve your own results — all in the cause of achieving what you want. It demonstrates how to create all the business staples from emails to reports to proposals to résumés; visual and oral

media — presentations, video and new media — blogs, social media posts and new channels yet to be invented.

Practicing the process I show you in this chapter will lead you to clarify your thinking, understand yourself and your goals better and relate to other people more effectively.

Big promises? Yes. Let's get right to it.

In this chapter, I highlight the core elements of good business writing and introduce a planning structure that enables you to figure out what to say and how to say it in just about every circumstance. This step-by-step approach to writing works for every communication platform with some adaptation for each. You'll immediately start to see how to improve your own writing. Once you've absorbed the foundation, the chapters that follow demonstrate how to apply these ideas to all your business communication.

Putting Strategic Writing to Work for You

Can you imagine building relationships without language? Think about movies in which two people who don't speak the same language fall in love. All those soulful gazes and sighs eventually look like uphill work — and the relationship stays pretty superficial — until one person learns the other's language. Today we initiate many relationships, especially in business, through the written word. In-person contact may follow, or it may not. In many cases we continue to rely on writing to build the connection and collaborate, whether the people are down the street or thousands of miles and hours away.

From everyday email to reports, letters and digital platforms, today's working world runs on writing. Therefore, the rewards of good writing have never been more extraordinary. The Internet enables us to reach beyond our personal geographic and social reach to almost anyone we want to sell to, collaborate with or learn from. Almost anyone with time and dedication can start a business and sell a product or service, post artwork, publish a book or establish authority as an expert on a subject.

There's just one catch. Because anyone can do this, unless you are a specialist or have a private niche, the competition is overwhelming.

Consider these statistics about online platforms:

- » **Email:** Globally, 4 billion people use email, and American workers receive an average of 126 business emails daily.
- » **Twitter:** 330 million people globally are active Twitter users, sending 303 million tweets per day.
- » **Websites:** The Internet holds 1.3 billion websites.
- » **LinkedIn:** More than 660 million members in more than 200 countries use this site.
- » **Blogs:** In the United States alone, 31 million active bloggers post monthly or more.

Of course, you're not competing with all of these email messages, tweets, websites and blogs, or reading more than an infinitesimal fraction of them yourself. But people today — just like you — are extremely selective about what they choose to read because so many options vie for their attention. Your blogs, online posts, proposals and emails will be read according to how well you write them. You'll build followers according to the value you deliver.

And always, in business writing, “value” means the right content that is well expressed and shaped for the readers you want. Good writing is never “a way with words.” A better maxim is “good writing is good thinking.” That’s why this book also focuses on how to create the right substance for your messages. Once you know what to say, how to say it becomes much easier.



REMEMBER

There are few captive audiences in today’s world. Check how many messages you’ve recently received that you *must* read, and how many you zapped away because they did not immediately interest you. Even if you hold top-down authority, there’s no assurance that your message will be read. Attention, along with respect, must be earned. Writing a message that someone will actually read is an achievement. Writing messages that people will act on demands not just writing that is clear and direct, but also content that aligns with what your readers care about. In other words, today’s business writing needs to be strategic.

What is *strategic writing*? Planned communication that achieves a set of goals — the goals of your employer if you hold a job, and always, your own goals. The good news is that you already have a solid base for knowing how to write strategically. You’re in command of the three imperatives:

- » **Your subject:** You are invested in your field and possess in-depth knowledge of it.

- » **Your audience:** You know who your audience is, such as prospective employers, coworkers, people who share an interest of your own and target markets for your business.
- » **Your goal:** You know what you want, now and in the bigger-picture future.

Here are some of the things you may *not* know yet:

- » How to choose the right communication tool for the job
- » How to capture and retain reader attention
- » How to make people care about your message
- » How to understand other people's perspective and predict their responses
- » How to gauge the right degree of formality and when to convey emotion
- » How to select the right content to make your case
- » How to use writing techniques that make your material persuasive
- » How to use every single thing you write to build relationships and advance your cause
- » How to coordinate your online platforms to achieve your purposes
- » How to sharpen your ear and eye so you can spot your own writing problems and fix them

This book shows you how to do all of this.



TIP

Notice that in line with my focus on the *thinking* part of writing, almost every item in this list relates to that. But of course, the technical side of writing — how you use language — matters, too, and I cover that as well. You'll find a broad resource of practical tips for improving your sentences, use of language and organization. Try out these ideas and tips to discover the techniques that work best for you.

Let's start with a planning structure that will help you figure out what you want to say and how to say it. You may be surprised at how much better your messages are received, and how much more often you get a positive response, as soon as you start applying it.

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 the three components of strategic writing. You already know them:

- » **Your subject:** What you're writing about
- » **Your audience:** Whom you're writing to
- » **Your goal:** What you specifically want to accomplish

To create a good message and get the result you want from your reader, you need to think about all of these things more systematically than you ordinarily might.



REMEMBER

You must “read” your audience in an organized way, which I show you shortly. And you benefit from visualizing your goal in a broad way. Consider that for almost every message you write, you actually have a whole set of goals beyond the immediate: communicating your own professional image, for example. When you combine your knowledge of the audience with your set of goals, it becomes easy to translate what you know about the subject into content that supports your message.

For example, suppose Jake wants to ask his supervisor, Jane, for a plum assignment on the horizon. He 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 may be okay insofar as it's clear and contains no obvious errors. But it's definitely not compelling. All Jane learns from the message is that Jake wants the opportunity and thinks he's qualified.

Jake would fare better if he planned his message out. *The first thing to consider with every message is your goal.* Thinking about this will show Jake that his goal is more complex than “I want this opportunity.”



SHORTCUT

The best way to prompt your best thinking, especially when a message is important, is to write down the relevant facts and ideas. When you try to solve a problem “in your head,” you probably find that the same ideas keep circling around and getting past them is hard. Instead, watch magic happen when you write out your thoughts. The concreteness of this action pushes your thinking forward in a natural way: You'll be surprised at how much more you know, and in many cases, can intuit. Ultimately this saves time because it avoids the inefficiency of mental meandering.

Should Jake ask himself exactly what results he wants his message to produce, his list might look like this:

I want a chance to . . .

Exercise more responsibility

Show off my capabilities — be noticed!

Expand my know-how about this project's subject

Add a management credential to my résumé

Work with an interesting team and get to know the people

But he should consider even more: the bigger picture. What could a good message accomplish longer term?

Strengthen my position for future special assignments

Remind the boss of my good track record

Present myself as a capable, reliable, resourceful leader

Build toward a promotion or higher-level job in this organization or elsewhere

From this vantage point, Jake can see the pitch itself as a building block for his overall career ambitions. This is worth a better message than the perfunctory one he dashed off.

So far Jake has really been asking himself *why* he wants the assignment on a level beyond the obvious. The next basic question to answer is, *who's my audience?*

Jake must think about Jane and see his request through her eyes. What skills does she most value? What does she care about? How does she see the job requirements? How can he match up his qualifications with the assignment's demands in a way the decision-maker will find relevant?

Taking all this into account, Jake might come up with a list like this.

Important to Jane: *Collaborative teaming; people skills; independent initiative; department reputation; effective presentation; track record as team member on earlier projects. I also know she feels weak in systems planning and insecure with new technology. This is an important project she will be judged on herself, so needs all the reassurance I can give that I'll handle it perfectly.*

Job requires: *Leadership abilities; planning skills; ability to meet deadlines; knowledge of XYZ systems; experience in teaming and cross-departmental coordination; good judgment under pressure. A useful plus: tech and presentation skills.*

And voilà, Jake has produced a blueprint for content that presents him persuasively. His email can cite his proven track record in accomplishing previous project goals and cite his people skills, ability to work independently and deliver results as a team member and leader, desire to enhance the department's reputation and confidence in using his demonstrated presentation skills to ensure the project shows effectively.

The weaknesses he pinpoints 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 elements are particularly apt to catch Jane's attention.



WARNING

All Jake's points must be true! I don't suggest ever making up qualifications, but rather, that you take the trouble to communicate the best of what is real and what matters in a particular situation.



TIP

Further, never assume people understand your capabilities or remember your achievements, even if they're colleagues who know you well or a boss you've worked with for years. *Other people don't have time to put you in perspective, nor, usually, the interest.* They're thinking about themselves. That's why doing it yourself has such power. But always be careful to avoid a boastful tone.

The beauty part of creating this strong strategic message is that whether or not Jake gets the assignment, he has built toward his longer-range goals of presenting himself as ready, willing and able to take on new challenges and to be seen as more valuable. Writing is an amazing tool for building your positive image over time, message by message, and recognizing the opportunities.



REMEMBER

What Jake's message illustrates is how to use a simple planning structure for everything you write. My shorthand for this is simply:

Goal + Audience = Content

When you define what you want to accomplish with a specific message, and think about the specific person you're writing to and what points will resonate with them, content decisions almost make themselves.

When you use this structured thinking to plan your messages, whether they're straightforward updates or proposals or anything in between, you move far toward the heart of good writing — real and relevant substance. Writing is not a system for manipulating words, and don't ever expect it to camouflage a lack of thought, knowledge or understanding. Good writing presents solid substance clearly, concisely and transparently in ways that make sense to your audience.

I make you a rash promise: For every fraction you improve your writing, you'll improve your thinking along with it. Plus, you will improve your ability to understand other people, which is infinitely rewarding. It will help you build better relationships and achieve what you want much more often, in every part of your life.



TIP

Chapter 2 gives you an in-depth demonstration of this planning structure and shows you how to translate it into successful messages whatever the subject, whatever the medium. 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 foundation for deciding *what* to say in any circumstance. Remember that the ideas apply equally to communications that appear to be dominated by visuals or spoken language.

The other essential groundwork for successful writing is *how* to say what you want. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 demonstrate common-sense techniques that professionals use to spot problems and fix them with the least effort and attention to formal rules.



SHORTCUT

Many people find the idea of editing a cheerless prospect. But it can be done in down-to-earth ways that have almost nothing to do with mastering grammar. To give you an idea of techniques you can use, here's one for upgrading your own work immediately: the *say-it-aloud diagnosis*. When you read your own copy aloud (or whisper it to yourself if you're not alone), you'll hear immediate signals that something isn't working or can work better.

You may notice that your sentences have a sing-song cadence that denotes awkward construction, or that they are overly long and have unnecessary words. You may hear repetitive sounds or inappropriate pauses created by poor word choice or punctuation. You can easily fix such problems, and many more, once you listen to how your writing sounds. It's not a dumbing-down approach: Many professional writers use it. And read-aloud works beautifully for business writing, which should ideally have a natural, conversational feel.

No matter where you now see yourself on the writing spectrum, I guarantee there's room for improvement. Most journalists, corporate communicators, bloggers and public relations specialists are obsessive about discovering better ways to write and build their skills. They want to create material that's ever more interesting, persuasive, informative and engaging. Don't you?



REMEMBER

For people inhabiting any part of the business, nonprofit or government worlds, the rewards of better writing are often immediate. Your email and letters get the results you want much more often. Your proposals are more seriously considered and your reports are more valued. You are perceived as more authoritative, credible and capable. People accord you more respect, often without knowing exactly why. And you move toward your goals faster.

WHY YOU CAN LEARN TO WRITE BETTER AND HOW YOU'LL BENEFIT

If good writing is a skill that can be developed — and having taught hundreds of adults, I assure you it can — you may wonder *why* you don't currently write as well as you'd like. You already learned to write in school, correct?

Actually, unless you were lucky enough to have an unusual teacher, the people who taught you were not oriented toward practical writing. Writing in academia is usually aimed at demonstrating your understanding of what you learned, or contributing to the store of human knowledge. Traditionally, this world rewards dense, complicated, convoluted writing full of expensive words. This *is* changing, but not very fast.

Business writing, on the other hand, always has a goal and is geared toward action. Every business message is at heart “an ask”: You are writing to request something. Looking at it this way, it's clear why the structure I'm giving you works every time. When you ask for something in person, you automatically frame your case within the other person's perspective and absorb that person's cues to adjust what you say. Writing lacks that advantage, so you have to consciously anticipate reader response by being more analytic.

When it comes to the technical side of writing, your own reactions are your best guide: Do you not prefer a message, whether short or long-form, that instantly communicates why you should read it? Is clear, concise, easily understood, to the point and conversational? Becoming a good business writer is based on learning to use your own common sense, with a little psychology and detective work and tricks-of-the-trade thrown in.

No matter your experience with writing so far, I bet you'll find it a lot easier (and more fun) to learn business writing than you may now think. And the rewards may come faster than you expect. Long term, you'll own a major competitive advantage that sets you apart from the crowd. Recent surveys show that across virtually every industry, good communicators are highly valued, sought and most often promoted. Good writers are in especially short supply.

Applying the Goal-Plus-Audience Strategy to More Media

You may have felt challenged at times to write differently for so many forms of communication, or may even have avoided using new or unfamiliar media. Here's the best encouragement I can give you to experiment and venture forth: The strategizing process is the same for all media, present and future. Planning a brief effective email is very much the same as planning a proposal or blog post, presentation or résumé. The Goal + Audience = Content structure will never fail you, no matter how hard the writing challenge seems.

For this reason, my early examples in this book are “small” messages like email. Once you absorb the thinking process for this everyday communication channel, you're well prepared to tackle more formal business documents and strategize your digital presence and in-person communication.

Succeeding with email, letters and business documents

Email remains the dominant everyday medium for most business communication medium, though it's increasingly supplemented by private organizational systems like Slack and online platforms. Whether you work remotely or in an office, as an entrepreneur or independent contractor, you need to do it well. If you were hoping email would go away, sorry: Surveys say its use is growing globally by 3 percent per year.

In many ways, email is also the most basic medium, so it's a natural starting point for improving how you write. Even if you don't use email much, it makes a good demonstration model. So read the guidelines and examples presented in this book and know they apply to most other writing tasks.

Once you're familiar with the planning process, I give you what you need to know about choosing the right words, creating good sentences and editing — recognizing your own shortcomings makes it easy to improve. I'll show you the fixes. I'll also cover the challenge of tone: creating the right “voice” for a written message. When do you want what you write to convey enthusiasm? Emotion — positive or negative? What degree of informality is appropriate to both your goal and audience?

Later in the book, I move into long-form materials that often feel like make-or-break opportunities: reports, proposals, business pitches, executive summaries. Your foundation with lowly old email will serve you well here, giving you a solid foundation.

Writing to present yourself powerfully

Once you're grounded in business writing basics, the book moves on to non-written formats. Communicating orally doesn't mean you dispense with writing! From a 15-second "elevator speech" to hosting a webinar to pitching live for a contract, the best system is: Plan, write, edit, rehearse, then deliver. The first stop is to explore the principles of persuasion in Chapter 8. You'll want to absorb these ideas about using persuasive language into all the media you use, along with how to communicate with conviction, identify your personal value proposition and tell your story.

Then, in Chapter 9, learn how to create a speech or visual presentation from formal to casual occasions, and adapt to the particular use of language that spoken media demand. Discover here the CEO's secret: creating talking points, a technique that enables you make your case effectively and handle challenges on your feet.

We're on the move in Chapter 10! In today's mobile and fluid world, we're always thinking of the next step. Presenting yourself as an outstanding applicant for jobs, contracts or gigs is an almost constant challenge. This chapter shows you how to define your strengths and develop your personal value proposition, which puts you way ahead in writing résumés, cover letters and successful networking messages.

Writing online: From websites to blogs to tweets

People often assume that when it comes to online content, they can toss all the old writing rules out the virtual window. Big mistake! Digital media with its lightning delivery speed and infinite reach does upend many traditional ideas about communication — top-down thinking, most notably, whereby authoritative figures issue "the word." Today anyone can market a business, entertain the world and become a journalist or author. But this democratization makes the need to write well more imperative than ever.



WARNING

There are simply too many websites, blogs, tweets, Instagram posts and all the rest to compete against if you don't provide first-rate material people want. The wide-open pioneering days of social media are in some ways over, even though new platforms keep emerging. Any digital guru will tell you that only the very best "content" gains an audience anymore.

So, in Chapters 11 and 12, I focus on how to develop content that is well-planned, well-worded, well-edited and well-aimed and exactly on target for the audiences you choose. To be most productive for you, whether you're an employee, a

business owner, a freelancer or work on behalf of a social cause, the use of online platforms also demands comprehensive thinking. Impact is achieved when the pieces add up to more than the sum of their parts. You need a consistent message, adapted to each venue.

As you read this, I'm sure new technologies are emerging to dazzle and intrigue us. But the newest technology is basically one more delivery system for your messages. You will need clear thinking and good writing to succeed. The techniques presented in this book will not go out of date! But adapt them with imagination.

Leveraging your writing skills

If you're an employee on any level who wants to stand out, I've got you covered in Chapter 13. Learn to use writing to manage up, manage down and manage sideways — when you need to influence others without having formal authority. Strategic messaging enables you to establish trust, communicate professionalism and as a leader, inspire your team.

If you work remotely, whether as a contractor, freelancer, consultant or a full- or part-time remote worker, Chapter 14 focuses on your needs. Use of tools including videoconferencing and instant messaging platforms are covered as well as teaming techniques, and the chapter provides examples of how to write some of the messages that challenge many independent workers.

Remembering to think globally

This book is based on American business writing style and practice. North Americans are singularly lucky in that their English has become the international language of business, reflecting the United States' economic importance of the past century. But if you run a cross-national business or work for one, it's a mistake to assume that your audiences in other cultures will read your writing in the way you want.

Someone who learned English as a second, third or fourth language may not find your email, letters and websites easy to understand. Spoken language skills are much easier to acquire than written ones. Further, cultural differences may be much bigger than you think.



WARNING

It's often remarkably hard to realize that everyone is *not* on the same wavelength. Every country and culture has distinct values and perspectives. For writing, this means taking into account factors that include preferred degree of formality, attitude toward business relationships, priorities such as courtesy versus efficiency, specific ways of opening a conversation and an expectation of directness versus indirectness. In some countries, saying yes may mean no!



REMEMBER

Even if cross-border communication doesn't concern you, most workplaces are increasingly diverse. People don't leave their cultural perspective at home when they come to the office. Your coworkers, partners and customers may have grown up anywhere in the world.

How can you write in ways that works for other people, in this case those with limited English-speaking skills? The second aspect is psychological: How can you communicate well with someone whose goals, values, background and experience are unlike your own, though invisible?

This question relates to the most basic premise of this book. So often we overlook how different people are from each other. You feel that you are unique — and you are. So is everyone else. We each see the world through our own filters, unconsciously constructed of innate characteristics, personal experience, cultural values and everything we grow up with and that happens to us.



TIP

Taking the trouble to see through other people's filters is what enables you to communicate powerfully in every medium, from conversation to proposals, and at the same time, to be more self-aware.



REMEMBER

Really good business writing is not about formulas, smart responses and clever manipulation of other people. It is best based on understanding individual people and seeing the world within each one's framework. What does this person care about? Hope for? Worry about? Writing this way is especially challenging when you communicate with people you've never met and with large unseen audiences, such as through a website or blog.

The syntax of writing — the arrangement of words, phrases and sentences — is a tool for delivering your messages and must be used well. But the message is what matters. Understanding your own goals and practicing empathy enables you to build meeting points for true communication and relationships.

Improving your writing will open up your perceptions and sharpen your thinking. There's an aphorism that says, "How do I know what I think until I write it?" In my view, writing is the best imaginable way to grow your understanding of other people, foster your business relationships and work toward becoming your best and most successful self. What could be more rewarding or interesting?

You now know *why* improving your writing will benefit you and have already begun building the foundation to do it. The next chapter takes the Goal + Audience = Content formula further and shows you exactly how to strategize every message to accomplish your goals.

