



ways bad writing erodes
productivity and costs U.S.
companies billions

HURLEY, PHD

Believe it or not, bad writing is costing your organization big time.

A former Senior VP at Forrester Research and best-selling author, Josh Bernoff, studied the cost impacts of bad business writing. He found that poor writing imposes a multibillion dollar “tax” on U.S. businesses:

“America is spending 6 percent of total wages on time wasted attempting to get meaning out of poorly written material. Every company, every manager, every professional pays this tax, which consumes \$396 billion of our national income.”

How can *business writing* have such a dramatic impact? Consider the following four ways.

1: It takes workers more time to read through and understand bad writing.

Specifically, Bernoff’s research found that 81% of people who do a lot of reading for their work ([25.5 hours per week on average](#)) agree that poorly written material wastes a lot of their time.

The writing may be “too long, poorly organized, unclear, filled with jargon, and imprecise,” he says. That forces readers to slow down to work through what the author is really trying to say. In other words, bad writing takes valuable time to decode.

But just imagine if your organization could reclaim even just 2% of that lost time. For an enterprise with 1,000 employees, your workers would suddenly have over 500 hours free each week to devote to more important activities.

2: Bad writing can trigger Parkinson’s Law.

Imprecise and generic writing (e.g., “Complete the project on time and under budget”) can undercut results. By contrast, clear and detailed language (“Complete the project in six months with a \$100,000 budget”) can facilitate accomplishments.

Research from MIT found that specific [deadlines caused students to work faster](#). The same principle



applies to the business world as well. *Scientific American* reported on a study conducted by Kiva, which crowd-funds interest-free small business loans: application [completion rates shot up by 24%](#) when Kiva imposed a firm deadline.

Open-ended deadlines can cause people to work slower and may thus trigger Parkinson's law, which states that "work expands so as to fill the time available for its completion."

3: Bad writing can transform otherwise productive activities into wastes of time.

The University of Massachusetts at Donahue did a study of the economics of hosting the 2024 Olympics in Boston. They used passive voice throughout their report, which obscured the answers to important questions, e.g. who would be responsible for what. The resulting uncertainties – which were supposed to be answered by this research – [caused Boston to reject the Olympic bid](#).

Now imagine your organization had similarly submitted an important sales bid or proposal, only to see it tank because its author had filled the document with passive voice statements that left the prospect with too many questions to have confidence in you.

Next imagine you had written a crystal-clear, confidence-inspiring document – and it was your *competitor* struggling with its writing quality. Good writing by itself can be a differentiator.

4: Bad writing contributes to diminished employee engagement, which in turn reduces employee output.

Research shows that engaged, satisfied employees are productive workers. Per the DecisionWise [2016 State of Employee Engagement Report](#), employee engagement increases employee performance, employee retention, employee satisfaction, and even *customer* satisfaction.



Unfortunately, poor communication is one of the major factors that can torpedo employee engagement. According to the Society for Human Resource Management, half of employees ([48%](#)) cite communication as key to job satisfaction. Business writing, for better or worse, plays a role here. Badly done, it fosters confusion, frustration, and uncertainty.

In the end, bad writing is bad for business.

Bad writing creates an invisible source of “friction” that slows workers, diminishes output, and frustrates customers. The good news? Organizations can reclaim all that lost time, money, and engagement by helping their teams to produce better writing.

The Good News?

Your employees can learn strategies to write better documents in less time. [Hurley Write](#) has been designing and teaching strategic writing courses for over 25 years. Whether your team writes business, technical, or scientific documents, and whether you’re interested in instructor-led or online courses or webinars, we can develop a course that meets your team’s needs. Contact us today: info@hurleywrite.com or 877-249-7483.