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HOW TO WRITE MORE EFFECTIVELY

Abstract

This white paper discusses various rhetorical strategies, including language, writers can use to write more effective documents.

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How to Write More Effectively

Most people, when asked what makes writing effective, will answer “clarity” or “flow.” And that’s true, of course, but when asked how “clarity” and “flow” are created, many are at a loss to explain.

Actually, effective writing (and we’ll use the term “effective” rather than “good,” as “good” can be fairly subjective) is more than just writing that is clear and that flows; effective writing is writing that’s persuasive.

When we use the term “persuasive,” we’re using it very broadly; in other words, being persuasive involves more than simply getting a reader to change his/her mind, it’s about persuading the reader of the writer’s competence, professionalism, and intelligence. And, of course, part of this persuasion is certainly ensuring that our document is clear and that it “flows.” Writing a persuasive document means understanding how to create a document so that it meets reader needs, is useful, and helps readers access the information they need when they need it.

Persuasion

The idea behind persuasion is simply that readers make judgments about us and about the company or organization we work for based on the written documents we generate. Like it or not, it’s true. You can probably think of a document or two that you’ve read and thought, “Wow! That organization can’t even put together a decent letter; I’m not going to do business with them!” Or, you’ve probably read a letter or document written by an individual that makes you wonder about that person’s competence or professionalism.



Part of the judgment we make depends on obvious things, like grammar and punctuation; if the document contains many such errors, we easily dismiss the writer (and the organization) as not being detail-oriented and/or careful, and perhaps as being unprofessional or even incompetent. And, we may reason, if a writer can’t even take the time to proofread and spell-check, then how will that writer and her organization be able to provide adequate service or the proper attention to us and/or our business?

Another part of that judgment lies in how well the document uses language, is organized, and meets the audience’s needs, which we’ll discuss in this article.

How Do Writers Persuade?

In addition to using a spell-check and watching out for grammar issues, we persuade readers by considering them and their needs and wants.

Specifically, effective writers consider their audience and what their audience needs from the document and how the audience is going to use the document.

First, we can consider many aspects when considering our audience: their knowledge of the topic; their educational background; their age, gender, or race; their role within an organization (are they a decision-maker, for instance?); and even their demographics. Beyond these things, however, we might also consider things like their tolerance for the message (is the news good or bad?); their tolerance for the writer and/or the organization for which the writer works (has the reader had a bad experience with the organization and/or with the writer?); and even how busy the reader may be. Understanding these things as well as is possible can help us create useful, usable, and persuasive documents.



How can analyzing audience needs and use help writers? Knowing, for instance, that a reader is busy can help writers organize so that the most important, or relevant, information is first rather than last. How do writers know what's important to the reader? They'll know if they've thoroughly analyzed their readers. A busy reader, for instance, probably also wants headings and/or subheadings in the document so that the information the

reader needs at that particular time can be accessed easily and quickly. And if the reader is hostile or if the message is negative, writers can use positive language to create a feeling of goodwill in the reader.

Another important aspect of audience is that most readers are now what is considered “aliterate”; that is, they can read but they choose not to.

Understanding aliteracy can help writers create documents that enhance the reading process and make it easier for readers to get the information they need quickly and easily. And readability studies show that in addition to being alliterate, most readers don't read a document from beginning to end in one sitting. That said, one goal to creating a useful document is to help readers access the information they need at any one time.

In addition to making decisions about a writer's proficiency based on the written document, as readers we must also be persuaded to “buy into” the writer's argument. Again, let's use the word “argument” broadly, to suggest a point or purpose. How do effective writers get “buy in”? One way to create buy in is to use what's been termed “identification.” Identification can be created simply by organizing a document so that it meets readers' needs and use; however, beyond that, identification is simply the idea

of making the reader believe that the writer has the reader's best interest at heart. And that means generating a document that, in addition to being organized and using headings and subheadings, is easy to read and understand, groups related information, and helps readers find the information they need easily; in other words, a document that flows and is clear.

However, contrary to what we may believe, there are certainly times when we want to create an unclear document, one that readers may have difficulty reading and understanding. While creating such a document may arguably be unethical, certain industries do write such documents, either out of ignorance about their readers or because they want their meaning to be ambiguous (think, for instance, of certain examples of legal writing, computer manuals, or the writing found in insurance documents). The point here, however, is that creating an unclear document should be because of choice and understanding our audience, rather than because, as writers, we're unaware of what we're doing.

However, the goal of most organizations should be, and is, to generate well-written, easy-to-read and – understand documents in an effort to create a good impression, persuade our readers to buy into our argument, and to allow readers to be able to use the information in the way that they need and in the way that we, as writers, intend.

In addition to considering audience, writers also need to think about purpose. Purpose is simply the goals that we have for the document, or what we, as writers, need our document to accomplish. Do we, for instance, want our readers to use the document to make a decision? To be able to perform a particular action? To pass the document to others or to simply explain an idea? Effective writers are able to articulate the goal of their document; if we're unable to, then we probably won't write a document that will be useful to our reader or that will help us accomplish our goal. In addition to analyzing our audience and having a solid purpose, writers must know why readers are reading; that is, how do your readers intend to use the document, and is their intent different from ours?



One method we can use to help readers understand how to use our documents is to employ various rhetorical strategies. I've alluded to the use of headings and subheadings, which certainly help readers find and use information; we also, however, have many other tools at our disposal. What we need to understand as writers is that one way that readers make sense of documents is based on what they already know about written text. For instance, readers know that an introduction is supposed to tell them what they can expect in the document; they also know that an executive summary will condense the document, giving them many of the important elements discussed, and they know that a "discussion" section provides overall details of the paper and indicates why they're important and relevant. Since readers are already familiar with these things, then writers would be remiss not to use them. In other words, if writers understand how readers read and how they make sense of a document and can use

these familiar tools, half the battle is won!

Enough Theory! What About Some Practical Techniques?

Now that we've discussed some of the theory underlying effective writing, there are also practical techniques that we can use.

Excessive verbiage

One difficulty that lots of writers have is understanding how much is too much. In other words, including excessive verbiage can make the reader work unnecessarily hard to understand our point.



One question to ask ourselves is “Is every word that I’ve included in this sentence absolutely necessary for reader understanding?” Have we, for instance, written “the month of April” when simply “April” will do? Our readers probably understand that April is a month, so that’s unnecessary information. Another example is when we use phrases such as “rise up,” the “color red,” or “slow down.” The idea, of course, is that “rise” means “up”; that “red” can only be a color; and that “slow” implies “down” (we can’t “slow up”!). Often these are elements that writers may be unaware of and that take practice to find and remedy.

Excessive verbiage can also result from adding too much information, and this typically occurs when the writer has done too little analysis of the audience, and didn’t take the time to fully understand what the reader already knows and what s/he needs to know.

Pronouns with no noun referent

Another concept that can help make it easier for readers to read and understand our writing, to create flow, is to eliminate the use of pronouns that have no noun referents. In case you don’t remember what a noun referent is, every pronoun must have a noun that the pronoun takes the place of. For instance, if you use a pronoun such as “it,” the noun that that pronoun is taking the place of should be obvious. One common problem is that writers will start sentences and phrases with these pronouns; in addition to the fact that these pronouns typically have no noun referent, using them makes the reader work harder to get to the information, and may misdirect the reader in terms of what’s important.

Readability studies show that readers play closest attention to what comes first and last in a sentence; therefore, if you have unnecessary pronouns at the beginning of a sentence, you may be making the sentence unnecessarily cloudy. Let's look at an example:

"It is clear from the data that when birds are introduced into an environment, the bug population decreases."

What's the most important information here? Certainly, it's not the "it is clear," but that's what the writer is telling us. We can rewrite this sentence to eliminate the unnecessary pronoun, which also makes the sentence more concise:

"The data clearly show that when birds are introduced into an environment, the bug population decreases."

In the rewritten sentence, the data is emphasized, and the sentence is clearer and the writer can more easily find and get the point. Notice that the meaning is the same; the changes have only made the sentence more concise and have emphasized what's important: the data.

Changing verbs into nouns

Another common problem that writers often make is to turn perfectly good verbs into nouns. The problem is that doing this often makes us rely on weak verbs such as "is" rather than using more vibrant verbs. Another problem is that turning verbs into nouns can make our writing unnecessarily wordy. Here's an example:

"We should take into consideration the number of species in this area."

It can be rewritten to be more emphatic by using the "real" verb, which is "consider":

"We should consider the number of species in the area."

Let's look at another example:

"The recent proposal has helped us make progress toward revamping our policies."

In this sentence, because the writer has changed the real verb into a noun, the sentence necessarily contains two verbs: the "real" one ("progress"), which has been changed into a noun, and another one the writer has been forced to add ("make"). We can rewrite this:

"The recent proposal has helped us progress toward revamping our policies."

In the second sentence, we can shorten the sentence and make it more emphatic by using the real verb and using only one, rather than two, verbs.

Summary

While the practical techniques that writers can use to create clear documents are endless, space prohibits me from covering them all. However, analyzing your audience and understanding purpose can go a long way toward helping writers write clear, coherent, and effective documents, and is arguably one of the best ways to write documents that get the desired response. In other words, taking the time plan to carefully understand our readers, and their needs and expectations, and why they're reading the document can help us create documents that are clear and that "flow."

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Published in *The Federal Manager* (2005). 25 (1): 22-24.

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