

# **Writing Strategies Corporate America can *Really* Use**



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## Introduction

One principle that professionals must understand is that the writing they do for their company is a direct reflection on them and their company. Let's face it: we all make judgments based on the written documents that any given company produces. So, if those documents aren't thorough, we assume the company and/or its personnel aren't detailed; likewise, if the document is professional, well-written, and easy to understand, we believe that the company and its employees are professional and that they understand our needs. It's a simple concept, yet many writers in the workplace forget or ignore this.

As such, the articles in this eBook are based on concepts that will help professionals write documents that reflect their professionalism, intelligence, and talent. Some of the concepts discussed have been taken from my academic education and applied to the writing concepts we teach in our customized workshops. However, the majority is based on what I've learned about the issues professionals in the workplace who are tasked with writing, but whose primary jobs are not writing, face.

I've worked with a variety of these professionals, including those in engineering, pharmaceutical, IT, computer, drug development, and government, in the 25-plus years I've been teaching writing. What I've learned is that these professionals need easy-to-implement concepts and strategies that will make an immediate impact in their writing.

As such, the eBook frames these concepts so that they're easy to understand and implement. The information isn't meant to replace either instructor-led or online writing courses; rather, the idea is to introduce readers to new strategies, concepts, and techniques that will help them write more efficiently and effectively. Certainly, readers of this eBook will learn new approaches to writing and how to streamline their writing processes.

Of course, and as would be expected, we cover these topics and more in greater detail in our [online courses](#) and our [customized onsite courses](#). But again, we wrote this eBook to provide your team with new ideas and strategies that may result in a less stressful writing experience and in better written documents.

If you have comments or suggestions, please [email](#) us; we'd be happy to hear from you.

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## Chapter 1. Critical Thinking Skills in Workplace Writing

Most of us use our critical thinking, or problem-solving, skills in the workplace every day. What we don't often do is apply those same critical thinking skills to writing; however, we should understand that writing is problem-solving and thus, we can use our critical thinking skills and apply them when we write.

### *Planning*

Just as we plan a workplace project, we should plan our writing tasks as well. Planning can involve many things, but should involve analyzing our readers, writing a purpose statement, and planning the outcome, or the conclusion, of the document.

### *Organizing*

In addition to planning, consider what organizational strategy may work best for your message and your reader. Too many writers use the same organizational techniques, regardless of the message or the reader, which can result in a message being misunderstood by the reader.

### *Details*

The depth and amount of detail you include are also important. Sometimes lots of detail is necessary, while in other cases the focus should be on getting to the point quickly; this decision depends on your reader. Be sure to think critically about how much your reader knows and doesn't about the topic so that the document includes the appropriate details.

### *Target your Readers*

To effectively reach your audience, think critically about what they know and don't, how they'll read the document, and what they expect from the document. Taking the time to consider these items can go a long way toward helping us write documents that readers will read and act upon.

Use your critical thinking skills in planning and writing, as your workplace documents reflect upon your professionalism and that of the company for which you work. Taking the time to critically plan your document can help you save time when writing and reduce your efforts when revising.

## Chapter 2: Writing Effective Emails

Emails have become the main form of communication in the workplace, whether that means communicating with clients or colleagues. And emails are fine but, too often, writers forget that they are written communication and thus deserve the same consideration as other workplace documents.

Emails can be especially problematic: because we write them so often, we may forget the importance of using language, tone, and structure properly. We must also consider our readers and how we use tone. For instance, we wouldn't use the same tone addressing our boss as we would with a peer.

Conciseness is especially important in emails. Like it or not, we live in a world of five to seven second sound bites, and readers simply won't give us lots of time to make our point. In addition, most professionals are busy; thus, we need to ensure that we understand the main point we wish to make and make it. Don't make your readers wade through information they don't need or want to get to the point.

Email writers also often make the mistake of including too much information in emails and, consequently, that information is overlooked or lost. Emails are supposed to be brief, and this is what readers expect. If you have several ideas you need readers to act on, consider bulleting or indicating to the reader early on that the email includes several topics on which you need the reader's input.

In addition, don't forget the importance of the subject line, as this tells (or should) readers what they can expect in the email. Consider including in the email not only the topic, but the action you want your reader to take on the content. Doing this small thing can make a world of difference in how your email is perceived and if it's acted upon.

Remember too that emails may not be the best medium to use to get your message across. While we often rely on them exclusively, using the telephone or having a "face-to-face" may be more appropriate.

In short, emails, just like all other workplace documents, require some planning. Ensure that you've carefully analyzed your reader, defined your purpose, and figured out what the reader expects from the email. And above all, remember that emails, while often perceived as more casual than other workplace documents, are not a substitute for conversation.

Understanding the type of document that best conveys your message and how to write that document so that it appeals to your readers and gets the point across is crucial to help you and your organization write documents that meet readers' needs.

## Chapter 3. Lean Principles and Workplace Writing

*What does it mean to write effective workplace documents?*

Lean principles, as we know, encourage the reduction or elimination of waste. While the lean principles concept is typically thought of in terms of service and customers, we can also apply the principles to our workplace writing to ensure that our writing is clear and effective.

Waste, in terms of writing, can take a couple of forms: it can refer to the amount of wasted time spent in the writing process and to wasted language; that is, the superfluous, or extra, words we use to make our point.

In this chapter, we'll discuss lean principles in terms of the time we spend writing and provide suggestions for streamlining the writing process.

First, many writers in the workplace have no writing strategy; they simply put words on the page and hope for the best. This type of "strategy" means that they spend much time on the back end revising and rewriting. However, writers can create and use tools that will help them streamline and therefore "lean up" the writing process.

*Create an Audience Rubric*

We all know, or should, that analyzing our readers is one of the most important things we should do before we begin writing. Unfortunately, even for those writers who do analyze their readers, this analysis may be perfunctory and not based on any real knowledge about the reader. Our experience of working with professionals is that many tend to write to "the person in the next cube."

For instance, rather than analyze a reader as a "manager," consider instead how that manager reads and what that manager expects from you and/or the document. Using this knowledge can be as helpful, if not more so, than simply thinking about your reader as a manager. Then, we want to use what we know about our readers to create an audience rubric, or checklist; this kind of tool can go a long way toward helping us write targeted, useful documents.

*Write a Strong Purpose Statement*

Sometimes, because we understand our field so thoroughly, we forget that readers may have less knowledge and therefore may not understand the purpose of our document, or we assume that our readers have the same knowledge that we do, or we assume that the reader knows nothing. This kind of approach means that the writer isn't taking the time to analyze the reader or think about the purpose of the document, two mistakes that can result in poorly written documents. As writers, we need to consider what we want the reader to think, believe, feel, or do; this will help us write a purpose, or as we call it, an "outcome" statement. That is, what

outcome do you expect from the document? In short, writing a strong purpose statement is essential for two reasons: it helps you identify why you're writing and it keeps you on track and focused.

*Use Prewriting Strategies*

For many professionals, their first draft is the one they submit as their final. That's not necessarily a negative, but can be if the writer doesn't take the time to cull the important points. Prewriting, whether in the form of brainstorming, clustering, or freewriting, can help writers because it can decrease or eliminate writer's block, act as a "brain dump," and help writers understand what they know and don't about a given topic. These prewriting strategies can enable us to figure out how to begin that first draft and, ultimately, save us time when writing.

Just as we apply lean principles to ensure that our business runs smoothly and efficiently, incorporating these same principles into our writing can mean leaner, clearer communication.

## Chapter 4. Writing Reader-Focused Workplace Documents

All types of workplace writing, whether technical manuscripts, grants, or standard operating procedures (SOPs), should be written with the reader in mind. Many professionals, however, write writer-, rather than reader-, centered documents. Writing reader-centered documents is also called writing using the “you attitude” or “you viewpoint.”

To ensure that your documents are reader-centered, consider the following.

*How will my reader react to the information in the document?*

To write a reader-centered document, we first need to figure out how our reader will react to the information and how that information will impact the reader. For instance, will the information increase the reader’s workload, enhance some aspect of how the reader does his/her job, or have no influence whatsoever? Understanding reader reaction is a good first step in writing reader-centered documents because it tells us how to organize and/or relay information.

*What are my reader’s interest and/or concerns?*

To write a you-centered document, understanding the reader’s interest and concerns is paramount, as reader-centered writing emphasizes their interests and concerns. In fact, such writing emphasizes “you” and “your” while de-emphasizing “we” and “our.” However, more than simply using these pronouns, reader-centered writing puts the reader at the center of the document by ensuring that it focuses on what the reader thinks is important.

*How will I build my message?*

A positive reaction to information certainly makes the message easier to write; however, we should still ensure that the message is carefully crafted to focus on the reader. An example that we like to use is an invitation; many writers will write “I would like to invite you to the party.” In this example, the emphasis is clearly on the writer (“I”). To focus on the reader, the message should say “You are invited to the party.”

If the reader will react negatively to the information, we can write the message so that it considers the reader’s viewpoint. For instance, rather than write “We have not received your report,” we can write “Please submit your report by...” or “We require two copies of X,” we can write “Please provide two copies of X.” The “you” is implied.

To write reader-centered documents, take the time to carefully analyze your reader, how the reader will react to the information, and how you can write the message to ensure that the message is reader-, rather than writer-, centered. Writing reader-centered documents better ensures that your reader will come to the correct conclusion, react appropriately to the message, and take the applicable action.

## Chapter 5. Organizing the Document

Using the appropriate organizational strategy is important for various reasons: it can show readers how they're supposed to read and make sense of the information, help us emphasize and de-emphasize, and meet readers' expectations for documents.

To figure out how to organize, we can ask ourselves:

*What information is important or significant and where will my reader expect to find this information?*

If you've carefully analyzed your reader and you know why you're writing (purpose), asking what readers will find the most important can help you organize the document so that readers can find the information they need quickly. For instance, if I know that my reader is most interested in the conclusion, I might consider putting that first in the document. Or, if I know that my reader is interested primarily in what actions need to be taken, I might put recommendations first. Conversely, if I know that my reader needs background to be able to understand why I've made those recommendations, I would put background or other support first and the recommendations later.

*How will the reader use the information?*

Consider, too, how the information will be used. Is the reader reading because she wants to learn how to do something? To be persuaded? To understand? When we understand how the reader will use the information, we can then decide how to organize it so that the reader can easily accomplish her/his goals.

*How does the reader expect the document to be organized?*

Too often, writers forget that readers have certain expectations for documents. For instance, readers expect emails and memos to be brief and to the point, while more formal documents can be organized in a variety of ways to meet readers' needs and to ensure that the reader comes to the correct conclusion. Be sure to consider your readers' expectations for the document, in terms of format, function, and organization.

Writers have available to them a myriad of organizational strategies; the key is to figure out what the reader expects and knows and what the writer hopes to accomplish via the document.

## Chapter 6. Using Tone

In workplace writing, tone is as essential as content. Tone, according to Richard Norquist, is a writer's attitude toward the subject, the audience, and self, and is conveyed primarily through diction, point of view, syntax, and level of formality.

Let's discuss each of these to help us fully understand tone and how to ensure that it's appropriate.

### *Diction*

Diction refers to the words we choose and how we use them. Words, as we know, have both a dictionary definition (denotation) and a connotation; the connotation is simply the association that we make with a word. Let's say, for example, that someone hasn't completed a task. We have several ways to convey this: we can say that the person "failed" to complete the task (negative connotation); was "unable to" complete the task (which may raise more questions than it answers); or that the "task wasn't completed" (passive voice is used here to avoid placing blame).

### *Point of view*

Point of view refers to how you provide the information; that is, from your perspective or from that of your reader. Is your writing "we" focused (writer-focused) or reader-focused? Depending on the topic, most writing should be reader-, rather than writer-, focused, as we discussed in an earlier chapter.

### *Syntax*

Syntax is simply how words fit together; all languages have rules that help ensure that readers understand the message that's being relayed. Incorrect syntax can confuse readers and make us appear less intelligent or that we don't know what we're talking about. Readers of English, for example, expect that sentences will use a "subject-verb-object" structure. When this structure isn't followed, tone may be affected.

### *Level of Formality*

Whether we write formally or informally depends on the kind of document we're writing and our readers' expectations. For instance, we would be more formal when writing a resume or report, but may be less formal when writing an email to a colleague. We should ensure that we use the appropriate level of formality to meet readers' expectations, which assures us that the document will be taken seriously. Be sure to carefully analyze your readers to understand what level of formality to use.

Managing tone can be difficult but, with practice, you can ensure that your tone is appropriate for the type of document and reader.

## Chapter 7. Using Style

Style is simply how we say what we say; as writers, because we're all human beings, our style reflects our personality and voice and how we perceive our readers.

We can use words, phrasing, syntax, diction, and organization to reflect style. Choosing the appropriate style can be problematic; however, we can ask questions to ensure that our style is a proper reflection of us and our organization.

*Have I used the appropriate style for the situation?* As we discussed in the chapter about emails, we'd write a different email to our manager than we would to our colleagues, and this is considered style. We might be more casual in the email to our colleagues and more formal when emailing our boss.

*Have I arranged the words to reflect the appropriate style?* We have many different ways to construct sentences, depending on what we wish to emphasize and de-emphasize. Thus, sentence structure can play a large role in conveying our style.

*Am I using words that have negative connotations?* As we discussed in an earlier chapter, words have connotations (associations) and denotations (dictionary definition). Using a word with a negative connotation, even inadvertently, can create a style that readers may reject. Be conscious of the connotations of words.

*Am I relaying the information in a form that the reader will accept?* Some writers use a conversational style, while others use a more formal style. A formal style can be stilted and boring, and we should understand if a more casual style will help readers understand the message more quickly. The style we use to convey the message, whether informal or formal, can dictate how the reader reads and understands that message.

*Am I using words the reader will understand?* Be sure that you're not "talking down" to a reader or using terminology or phrasing that may frustrate or confuse your reader. Some writers, in an effort to appear well-versed in their field, will use pompous language, which may create a document that's convoluted or confusing. Use only the words necessary to get the point across. Remember, it's about the quality of the words you use, not the quantity.

Maintain a professional tone by ensuring that the words, sentence structure, and organizational strategy you use are appropriate for your reader and your message.

## Chapter 8. Enhancing Readability

Whether you write technical, scientific, or business documents, incorporating some basic principles of communication can make your writing more readable. Frank Luntz, a political consultant and strategist, breaks down these principles in his article, “10 Rules of Successful Communication.” We’ve summarized five of those rules here.

### *Simplicity*

Because professional writing is reader-focused, don’t confuse your audience by using large, unclear words, or jargon. Luntz’s article emphasizes the importance of “avoid[ing] words that might cause your readers to reach for the dictionary.” Simple terms allow for better clarity and understanding; that is, if you can use a one-syllable word, use it. Writers who write well understand that the quality of the words, not the quantity, is crucial.

### *Brevity*

In addition to keeping terminology simple, be mindful of style. For instance, long sentences and large paragraphs can be problematic if the information you’re trying to get across is dense. Luntz says, “Be as brief as possible. Never use a sentence when a phrase will do, and never use four words when three can say just as much.” Be mindful, however, that brevity does not mean that all of our sentences should be short and choppy, as such sentences can be more difficult to read and understand than longer, more complex sentences.

### *Credibility*

Establishing credibility helps create confidence in your writing. One way that we establish credibility is by ensuring that we’ve adequately analyzed our readers and written a message that targets them and their needs. In addition, we want to ensure that our message accurately reflects our professionalism and that of our organization.

### *Relevance*

In addition to credibility, expressing importance and relevance helps keep your reader’s attention. Most professionals are busy, so keep your message on point. After all, if your readers can get through your message quickly and easily without having to read any one paragraph more than once, they’ll think better of you and your company because you’ve made their lives easier.

### *Consistency*

Maintain a consistent format, style, and tone to create a pattern that helps your audience understand the topic. In addition, be sure that you use the same terminology throughout. Many writers will use a thesaurus to avoid using the same word or phrase, but if that word or phrase is key to helping your readers understand the subject, then it shouldn’t require a substitute. Consistency will help you create more readable and user-friendly documents.

## Chapter 9. Writing Concisely

If you think good writing is about word quantity rather than quality, think again! Rather, the goal is to document information concisely and use the most effective and precise words. The article “Conciseness,” by Purdue OWL, outlines some ideas for a clearer document.

### *Use specific words*

Often, writers use a long phrase where fewer words could be used. Because workplace writing should be readable, writers can exchange broad terminology and phrases for more relatable words and phrases. “As a general rule,” the article says, “more specific words lead to more concise writing.”

### *Analyze word use*

As important as the type of words used is using the appropriate number of words: “If words are dead weight, they can be deleted or replaced.” Readers can easily lose the main purpose in a storm of unimportant words. The easiest way to do this is to ensure that every word adds value; that is, delete words that don’t change the meaning if they’re removed or that make the writing difficult to understand. Deleting unnecessary words or phrases enhances readability.

### *Combine sentences*

In cases when information seems relevant but also loses conciseness due to wordiness, consider combining sentences. “Some information does not require a full sentence,” the article says, “and can easily be inserted into another sentence without losing any of its value.” In addition, short and choppy sentences can be much more difficult to read and understand than longer, more flowing sentences. Combining sentences can also help you show readers how ideas are related, thereby increasing readability and enhancing concision.

### *Read from the reader’s perspective*

To ensure that your specific reader will understand the document, read it from that reader’s perspective, or as though you have no knowledge of the information. Doing this will force you to become more aware of words and phrases that should be altered to create a document that flows and is more concise.

Writing concisely can be difficult, but is not impossible. Consider your readers, the words you choose, and how to show readers how ideas are related.

## Chapter 10. Writing Four Types of Workplace Communication

Generally, we can categorize workplace writing as four types: results-oriented, informational, persuasive, and negative. Each has its own purpose and should be written in a certain way.

### *Results-Oriented Communication*

Results-oriented communication is used, as the name suggests, when aiming for a specific output or result. For example, it might be used when inquiring about test results or requesting a promotion. “Results-oriented business writing is marked by active voice,” according to Barbie Carpenter in “Four Types of Communication in Business Writing,” “encouraging the reader to do something.” This style should include specific information to drive the intended results and be easily understood by your target audience.

### *Informational Communication*

The intended result of many documents in business is solely to inform. This type of writing, like all forms of communication, requires clarity and conciseness. In addition, because some readers need information quickly or have a short timeframe in which to read the document, being brief may also be important. An example might be a technical, business, or scientific report that relays results.

### *Persuasive Communication*

Persuasive writing drives the reader to make a decision or think or feel a certain way. Grants and proposals are good examples of this, because the writer wants to persuade these readers to buy a product or service or provide funding. Such documents require that writers use persuasive, compelling language that asks readers to take a particular action. Proposals are an excellent example of persuasive communication, because the reader must be convinced that what you’re offering is superior to that being offered by your competitors.

### *Negative Communication*

Sometimes businesses have to write negative documents; writing such documents without alienating the reader or having the document reflect negatively on you or your business is key. To ensure that the reader isn’t left with a negative impression, use the “sandwich” technique: begin with a sincere positive statement, follow with the negative information (phrased positively), and end with a positive statement. Be clear and explain the reasoning of your position, while using a sympathetic tone.

The type of communication you’re sending defines the organization, the language, and the style and tone you use.

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