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## THE CONSEQUENCES OF POOR WRITING

### Abstract

This white paper discusses the consequences of poor writing.

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We know a couple who were in the market for a new vacuum cleaner. They went to the store, checked out various models, and found one that seemed, at first glance, to have the right features and a fair price. Looking for more details, they then read the writing on the vacuum's packaging. Or tried to. The writing on the box had glaring mistakes in grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and the claims it made were too over-the-top to be believed. The couple decided that any company that didn't proofread its own writing or provide credible customer information couldn't be trusted to make a good product. They bought a different vacuum cleaner.

At Hurley Write we usually emphasize the positives of good writing: how it can make your proposals more persuasive, your reports more effective, your sales documents more convincing, and your internal communications more useful and efficient—in other words, how good writing can make your company more profitable and your workforce happier and more productive.

Occasionally, however, it's worth looking at writing from the other direction: to examine how harmful bad writing can be. Take the story of the vacuum cleaner. Because of sloppy and implausible writing, the company that made that unsold vacuum not only lost that one sale but also damaged its general reputation. Odds are, that couple also won't buy any blenders or steam mops from that company, and they won't speak well of the brand to their friends. One case of bad writing can send out ripples of bad news.

With that in mind, then, here are some of the ways poor writing can damage your company or organization:

- **Poor writing costs sales and business.** Whether your firm sells vacuum cleaners, cars, or airplanes, if product descriptions are unclear, unconvincing, or careless, people won't buy your product. That's true of the writing on your packaging, advertising, website, and anywhere else. If you're a contractor or service provider, sloppy, incomplete, or unpersuasive proposals, websites, and marketing materials will cost you business. If you're a nonprofit, poorly written publicity materials will cost you volunteers and donations.
- **Poor writing costs time.** Internal communications like reports, memos, and emails must be clear, relevant, and complete. If they're not, you and your employees will find yourselves forced to rewrite or explain them. Even worse, confused or misinformed employees could end up doing the



wrong work or doing work in the wrong way, so it has to be done all over again—if it's not too late. Poor writing is, literally, a waste of time.



- **Poor writing can damage employee morale and undermine respect in the workplace.** Poorly written communications to and between employees—training manuals, memos from a boss, emails from a director, letters from the CEO—can leave employees confused, angry, or insulted. A condescending tone, incomplete explanations of decisions, or biased language in a company-wide memo, for example, can annoy, perplex, or even frighten employees. When facts aren't clear in a company-wide document, rumors can replace them, and rumors often make things look worse. Finally, even otherwise capable managers can lose the respect of their team if their every written document is a mess of meaningless jargon, sloppy grammar, and muddled design.
- **Poor writing can hurt your organization's brand.** Your "brand" is how the world sees you—the associations it makes with your organization's name and the feelings it has about your organization's products or work. Your brand is more than your packaging (e.g., Coca Cola's iconic bottle), your logo (the Coke swirl), your motto ("It's the real thing."), or your advertising. Your brand is influenced by everything the public sees of you. A set of instructions influences your brand; Ikea's famously wordless furniture-assembly instructions are a good example. Corporate reports influence your brand; that's why large companies pay millions to writers and designers to create carefully written, beautifully designed annual reports. When your brand is damaged, more is lost than a single sale: the hit to your company's image hurts all your business interests, because the public will associate of your products or services with poor-quality work.
- **Poor writing can be dangerous.** Most obviously, a carelessly written or incomplete safety manual can result in injury or death. Likewise, a training manual that fails to lay out, in clear language, with useful examples, the rules for workplace behavior can result in the emotional damage caused by sexual harassment or workplace bias. Even a set of policies in your company handbook that fails to explain clearly your company's rules regarding sick days, vacations, retirement, and pensions may result in your workers' becoming unnecessarily overworked, stressed, or depressed.
- **Poor writing means lost ideas.** If your team can't write well, they can't share ideas well. The best idea in the world—an idea that could make your company more productive and profitable—will be lost if it finds no clear expression. A recommendation report, for example, that's incomplete, rambling, difficult to navigate, or muddled, may contain, somewhere in the mess, an excellent idea—but neither the idea nor the employee will get the respect and attention they deserve.

Good ideas demand good writing; bad writing can leave even the best ideas lost forever in the fog.

These are just some of the dangers of poor writing in the world of business. Let's end by reminding you that, whatever your business, good writing means higher profits, greater productivity, more respect from the public, and better morale in the workplace.

Do you need help analyzing your teams' writing process? Or are you interested in improving your teams' writing skills? We offer customized onsite and online business, technical, and scientific writing course.

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