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SIX QUESTIONS YOUR COMPANY SHOULD BE ASKING

About its documents and writing process

Abstract

This white paper discusses the value of understanding your teams' writing processes and provides six questions that companies should be asking about their documents and the writing process.

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It is no secret to anyone in business that writing, and writing well, is critical, whether that writing is in the form of emails, whitepapers, proposals, or reports.

What may be less obvious is that poor writing can damage a business, a topic we discuss at length in our white paper, "[The ROI of Effective Writing.](#)" What can be done to reverse the effects of poor writing? Obviously, starting with the writers themselves makes sense. But first, organizations must recognize that there is a problem in how their employees plan, write, and revise. Second, the organization must ask the right questions to figure out how to fix the problem.

The second item often doesn't happen for several reasons: 1) many businesses fail to recognize that their real deliverable is the written document; 2) many organizations believe that a poor knowledge of grammar is to blame for deficient writing skills; 3) many organizations lament the lack of strong writing skills, but fail to assess why the writing is poor; 4) well-meaning managers and supervisors, acting as surrogate editors, edit the documents of others but focus on grammar and style, which may be the only factors they associate with good writing; and 5) companies often use poorly written models to illustrate how a document is to be written. Let's discuss these point by point and discuss what companies ought to be doing to address poor writing.



Point One: We've all done it: read a document and thought, "This document is too difficult to read" or "This document is too verbose" or "This document is too long or doesn't meet my needs." Whatever it is, we all do this because that's what readers do: they make judgments about the document and its readability and about the writer and the writer's organization.

Personally, I've opted not to do business with a firm that couldn't produce a well-written, thoughtful piece that focused on my needs. And I'm sure I'm not alone. The take-away is that readers are judging your company and deciding whether to do business with you based on the documents your teams produce; therefore, ensuring that these documents reflect the professionalism and intelligence of your staff is crucial.

Point Two: Since, as we've established in Point One, the document is *the* deliverable, wouldn't it make sense for organizations to understand how well their documents are doing the intended job? Organizations spend money and resources on all types of research and data to ensure that the firm is making money, spending money wisely, and delivering quality products and service to customers, but they often don't take the time to assess the effectiveness of their documents

or if their employees have the tools they need to plan, write, and revise effectively and efficiently.

Point Three: While grammar is important in a well-written document, it's not of primary importance because it's the easiest aspect document to remedy. Instead, nonwriters should focus instead on content of the document, rather than on grammar (or wordsmithing, an equally time-wasting activity), especially in the early stages of writing. Content, and how that content is conveyed, is king.

Point Four: In many organizations, since editing is often left up to project managers and supervisors who have had no real training as editors, personal style/preferences often become an issue. For instance, we've had project managers tell us that they don't allow their personnel to use the gerund form ("ing") of a verb or to use "that" in any of their written documents. This reliance on antiquated and often senseless rules can result in three issues: 1) supervisors and managers spending far too much time editing; 2) an editing process that doesn't result in better writing because the recipients either don't understand the changes being suggested or feel that the meaning has been changed; 3) an acrimonious process that leaves both the editors and the writers frustrated.

The take-away is that while editing is important, businesses need to create an established process with ground rules based on readability studies, so that less time is wasted, the editing process is embraced, and both parties have a good understanding of what's expected and what the outcome will be.



Point Five: Models are often used (models are not templates, but are documents that someone else, or the writer him or herself, has written that are used to recreate the same type of document) in many companies, often in the belief that they save time. The problem with many of these models is that there may be an assumption that the model itself is adequate and/or that the model works in all cases. Unfortunately, the use of models can often undermine the credibility of the writer because their use can make the writer appear lazy or thoughtless and the models themselves become a "one size fits all," which translates into little thought or care being given to how a writer should approach a topic and/or reader to get the best outcome.

What Questions Should You be Asking?



Managers, supervisors, CEOs, and business owners would be well served to assess how effectively their staffers are planning, writing, and revising. Asking a few simple questions can give any organization valuable information to help them understand what's working and what's not and how to remedy any problems:

1. **How much time do they spend planning the document?** Planning saves time in the writing process, but is often one of the most neglected aspects of writing. And by the way, organizations need to provide writers with ample time to plan, even when time is an issue (there are lots of ways to do this).
2. **How do they approach their writing tasks?** Do they procrastinate or do they spend time every day planning and writing? [Research](#) shows that spending time every day writing results in improved writing. Again, this doesn't mean hours and hours; 15 minutes a day is all that's needed.
3. **What is their attitude about writing?** Do they dislike it? Are they enthusiastic and confident? Do they feel that writing is secondary to their "real" jobs or that their writing is undervalued/unimportant because someone else will rewrite it anyway? How they view writing may speak to larger cultural issues within the organization; understanding their attitudes and why they feel as they do can help you devise a solution.
4. **What does their writing process look like?** Do they, for instance, wait until the last minute? What tools do they have in place to plan and write? Are they using the same process (models, for instance) regardless of the outcome? Do they have a process at all? When writers fail to understand why they do they do, they're doomed to commit the same mistakes repeatedly.
5. **What questions arise from your staff's documents?** What questions do clients/customers have? What kind of feedback are clients/customers providing? How often do your staff's documents result in the desired outcome? Taking the time to assess the effectiveness of your documents for customers/clients can provide great information about what's working and what's not.
6. **What's your firm's editing process and is it repeatable?** For instance, how many rounds of editing, typically, does it take to polish a document)? Do nonwriters themselves have adequate tools to self-edit? Do managers and supervisors, or those who edit the documents, have a common foundation they use to edit, or is it that everyone edits in a way that makes sense to them? What kind of feedback is being provided and are writers given the opportunity for pushback? Editing should be a process in that writers and editors have the same expectations and writers are empowered to question feedback.

Answering these questions can help you understand what needs to be done to provide your nonwriters with the tools they need to plan, write, and revise more effectively.

Conclusion

Asking these simple questions will go a long way toward helping you assess how well your teams' writing process matches up with the intended outcome of the company's documents. When a team dislikes writing and therefore puts it off, the outcome is probably a document that lacks thoughtfulness; likewise, when we have no real editing process in place, the result will probably be a cadre of frustrated writers who don't give writing the time and energy it deserves.

The documents your teams generate reflect their intelligence and proficiency; knowing this, taking the time to critically analyze your teams' writing and editing process can pay off in terms of saved time, less frustration, happier clients/customers and, most important, documents that reflect your business as the professional enterprise it is.

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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