



Patricia Kantor Associates

EFFECTIVE PRESENTATION SKILLS TRAINING

Phone: (914) 769-1788

Fax: (914) 769-3127

pkantor@patriciakantorassociates.com

www.patriciakantorassociates.com

Business Writing Workshop

Writing Guide



Created by
Patricia Kantor
and
Jill Hamburg Coplan

BUSINESS WRITING GUIDE

The Writing Process

1. Brainstorm

Allow yourself a “free writing” period to throw down ideas without inhibition. Such a creative process, without editing, may let your unconscious throw out useful material. Generate freely.

2. Organize your thoughts

Plan what you want to say and how you’ll say it with some notes. Consider your goals: Do you want the reader to know something? To take a particular action? Make a decision? Clarify your goals, in order of priority. Consider your presentation from your reader’s perspective: What’s his or her background, depth of knowledge in the subject area? Use your goals as guidelines. You can even write them into the document (though you’ll erase them later). Use a diagram, if you find it helpful (flow chart, windmill, sticky notes, left side=main ideas/right side=details, bulleted list, standard outline format, or whatever works).

3. Draft

The time you’ve spent considering your goals and your reader’s point of view should make this easier. Imagine the reader in front of you. Compose the rough draft as if you’re talking to him or her. Try writing the first draft without using your notes.

4. Revise

After a few minutes away from the document (or hours, or even days, if you have time), return with fresh eyes to revise what you’ve written. Don’t be afraid to transpose sections or rewrite any part that seems flawed. It’s not a sign of weakness! The best writers revise intensively.

5. Copy edit

This is the micro-edit, with a magnifying glass. Change any unclear sentences. If you can, use an editor. It’s easy to miss problems in your own work.

6. Proofread

Do this without distractions. Carefully proofread especially any changes you’ve made: read those aloud. Proofread every letter and every space. This is also the time to use your software program’s spell-check and grammar-check functions.

BUSINESS WRITING GUIDE

A Business Writer's Checklist

Accuracy

- Have you double-checked figures, the spelling of names, dates, and times?
- Have you proofread for grammar, spelling, and punctuation?
- Has someone given it a once-over proofread?
- Have you looked up spelling or meaning of words that gave you difficulty?

Tone

- Pretend to be your audience. Does it give the impression you wanted?
- Have you been cordial and warm but not overly personal?
- Is there any unintentional bias in your language?
- Are you happy with the person who comes off the page?
- Is the tone too upbeat, or glum, given the context?
- Does it achieve the right mix of informality and professionalism?
- Is the tone consistent from beginning to end?

Clarity

- Might the reader misunderstand anything?
- Is every word, every sentence, every paragraph clear?
- Are there any needlessly complex words?
- Are any words jargony, trendy, pompous, or antiquated?

Logic

- Have you answered any questions your correspondent had?
- Have you left anything out?
- Have any contradictions slipped in?
- Do ideas flow logically in the order they're presented?
- If it's persuasive writing, have you made the best possible case?

Brevity

- Are paragraphs short?
- Could anything be stated more simply?

Readability

- Have you used bullets and white space?
- Do the sentences vary in rhythm to avoid a deadening cadence?
- Does the sound of the language flow, without rhymes or tongue-twisters?

Grammar

- Have you generally avoided the passive voice?
- Have you cut, where possible, the verb "to be" in all its forms (including there is, there's, there are, there was, there were, there will be, there could have been)?
- Are most sentences front-loaded, with the subject coming first and making meaning early, rather than inverted?

BUSINESS WRITING GUIDE

Revising for Greatness

“Substitute “damn” every time you're inclined to write “very;” your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be.”

– Mark Twain

Revising isn't just correcting mistakes. It's taking something good and making it great. It's the polish, the revisit (from the Latin, *revisere* means “visit again”).

Going back and revisiting isn't an optional afterthought, if you've got the time. It's a major part of the writing process.

Should you move through the work from start to finish or focus first on problems? Do whatever you prefer, but do it.

Nine Tips on Revising

Much of the best work in tightening and strengthening stories comes in rewriting. Rewriting will improve your documents.

- 1. Read aloud.** Reading your copy aloud will help you identify the awkward parts that are candidates for elimination. It will also show you the overly long sentences.
- 2. Check each sentence.** Read your work sentence by sentence. Can any word or phrase be eliminated without hurting the meaning?
- 3. Replace phrases with words.** Look at the phrases in your copy and try to find phrases that can be reduced to a single word: “hardly ever” becomes “rarely”.
- 4. Reduce the use of adverbs.** Instead of using a verb modified with an adverb, see whether you can use a more precise verb that needs no modification: “dash” instead of “run fast”.
- 5. Cut the complex words.** “Utilize” says nothing more than “use”. “Approximately” says nothing more than “about”. Don't write “purchase” when you can write “buy”.
- 6. Say what is, not what isn't.** You can't always do this. Sometimes you have to say what isn't. But often you can strengthen and shorten sentences by stating what is.
- 7. Find any redundancies.** There's no need to make the same point twice.
- 8. Make sure it all hangs together.** If the contents of the document evolved during the writing, does the top still match the bottom?
- 9. Use the Business Writer's Checklist.** It's in this Workbook.

BUSINESS WRITING GUIDE

Lost in Translation: Cross-Cultural English Business Writing

“It’s striking how difficult it is for people to apply cultural relativity to the variation in [written] discourse and not be judgmental.”

– Michael Clyne, *Inter-Cultural Communication at Work*

As we noted in our “Reaching Your Audience” session, ignorance of cultural differences creates a barrier to intercultural communication. They’re not the result of prejudice, researchers say, or rejection of difference. It’s simply a lack of knowledge of the values and styles that influence the writing behavior of people from different places.

Along with understanding other cultures, it’s just as important to be aware of our own language and writing values—to see that they’re not universal. Understand how you operate, your intentions, your competencies: These are crucial skills for becoming a better writer and communicator.

When we understand the audience and how their cultural frames impact communication, and we understand our own, we can find a middle ground—a compromise position.

The Business writing values we’re working with here—reflected in Australian, British, and American textbooks—are just one set of values and norms. We believe they work as an international lingua franca. But they’re not the only possibility, not the only right answer.

What is culture? Ceremonies, clothing, etiquette, family customs, festivals, fine arts, food, ideology, language, literature, music, religion. It’s that and much more.

Cultural values come into play in what linguists call written “discourse patterns.” That’s academic jargon for “how people write.”

Cultural values influence the way people communicate, whether in a first or a second language. For example, culture comes into play in writing when we decide

- ◆ How much wandering off-topic is allowed?
- ◆ How deferential should the tone be?
- ◆ How much do you interrupt the flow of ideas?
- ◆ How brusque or aggressive may the request be?
- ◆ How repetitive can the text be?
- ◆ How patient will you be about allowing a single topic to be explored in great depth?

A lot of writing practice goes back to schooling. For example: German high school students need not even write essays—they may use diagrams or brief notes. Sometimes it goes back to ancient traditions of rhetoric, even to how religious texts were written.

Summaries of recent linguistic studies across cultures. We get a sense of common traits, by culture.

But first, a **CAVEAT!**

Cultures flow, change, intermingle, and cut across and through one another, regardless of national frontiers. They have blurred boundaries. The writing characteristics referred to below are meant only as loose guidelines to cultural styles. People belong to and move through a complex multiplicity of cultures—within and across societies.

English:

Marked by forceful delivery, and linearity: Delivery of points is clearly structured in a strictly logical order. Staying on topic is a big value; relevance is very important. No repetition—no recapping. Specifics are valued above generalizations: what’s precise, being concise. New ideas are signaled early. “Next, we’ll discuss . . .” The path the writing will take is predictably and clearly marked ahead of time. Generally, a controlled delivery without wandering or digressing.

Arabic:

Neat cause-and-effect organization, in briefer texts, on average. Each section offers a clear sense of completion. Parallels are drawn—there’s a balance between parts: If/then; First/then; Claim/justification. Expository writing shows a rhythmic balance pattern, where contrasts (or similarities) are presented symmetrically. Some scholars say this pattern is found in the Koran, Psalms, the Lord’s Prayer, the Beatitudes. Other contemporary research in Arabic suggests repetition and redundancy grows out of oral Arabic discourse. Arabic is the only culture with more focus on form—organization, presentation, logic—than English.

Hindi and the languages of India, Indonesian, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese:

A sense of “turning it over in your hands” in which multiple perspectives are considered—with analytical rigor. Less concern about form (order, organization) and more on content (meaning). Japanese *ki-sho-ten-ketsu* (beginning-development-change of direction-conclusion) is based on a classical Chinese rhetorical pattern not found in English. “Japanese discourse suggests possibilities while English discourse argues ideas,” one study found.

Some researchers say Chinese expository writing tradition is influenced by the type of answers required on civil service exams (though it was reformed over the years, and banned by the People’s Republic).

The Vietnamese pattern “*rao truoc, don sau* (“considering all implications and answering all possible objections”) looks at various aspects that bear on the central point.

Thai writing is influenced by a 600-year-old poetry device that catalogues characteristics, with a conclusion that restates the thesis.

Research on Marathi discourse finds it has a spiral-like structure, likely an inheritance of oral tradition, and no explicit statement or thesis is required at the outset. Criticisms tend to be expressed ambiguously.

Western Europe and Latin America (German, Italian, Spanish):

Writers are encouraged to digress freely: German doctoral theses include specific sections for digressions or “excursions” (*exkurs*) which allow the writer to add more desirable dimensions (an historical aside, a theoretical point, a polemical debate). Sections may be of different sizes, being symmetrical isn’t a value. Rhetorical style tends to be adventurous—the order of points may take unexpected, surprising, and exciting turns. Circularity (a recap) is acceptable. Wide-ranging exploration is encouraged. It’s OK to go off-topic. That the writing is rich in content (and accurate) is valued above every point being relevant. Sometimes there is a disorganized presentation of meta-data (labeling of captions, tables, charts, tables of contents).

Eastern Europe, Russia:

Similar to Europe, above, but even more freewheeling. A wide-ranging approach to a subject.

Finland:

One study of European countries found Finnish newspaper editorials were most likely to lack thesis statements. Another study found that Finnish writing resists simplification or narrowing down to one point. Uses fewer superlatives and is less emphatic than American English, which sounds exaggerated, overstated, inaccurate. Short and matter-of-fact tone; more indirect.

Norwegian

One study found Norwegian writing less polemic, less argumentative. Writing involved less reproach and more praise. Less theoretical than German academic papers—more balance of theory and evidence.

This all matters because we’re not picking up meanings as clearly as we think we are. Here’s a model of how researchers understand the process of communication:

OLD view

- 1) Speaker has thought
- 2) Speaker formulates clear message
- 3) Receiver receives complete message

NEW VIEW

- 1) Speaker has thought
- 2) Message influenced by
 - Knowledge of the world
 - Ways of organizing information
 - Sentence grammar
 - Values and beliefs of which the speaker may or may not be conscious
- 3) Receiver must interpret message

BUSINESS WRITING GUIDE

Mastering Eight Common Grammatical Problems

“A word is not the same with one writer as with another. One tears it from his guts. The other pulls it out of his overcoat pocket.”

– Charles Peguy

- 1. “Front-load” meaning by putting the subject at the beginning.**
“Joe ran to school,” not “School is the place Joe ran to.”
- 2. Make sure singular and plural agree.**
“The office announced they will close early” is wrong—“office” is singular. Instead, “The office announced it will close early.”
- 3. Don’t string together a dense chain of nouns.**
Deadly: “Quality-control-standards publication processes”
Better: “The way we publish the standards for quality control”
- 4. Verbs give writing life, but don’t mix tenses.**
Wrong: “I called your number for hours until finally I’m getting through.”
Correct: “I called your number for hours until finally I got through.”
- 5. Minimize use of the verb “to be”** (am, is, are, was, were, be, being, been). It’s dull and static. So are “to have” and “to do.”
- 6. Don’t turn lively verbs into dull nouns ending in -tion** (nominalizations).
Dull: “An evaluation was undertaken.” Better: “We evaluated.”
Dull: They did not give an explanation. Better: They didn’t explain.
- 7. Use adjectives and adverbs sparingly.**
If you cut them all, meaning wouldn’t suffer. Lose “Very,” “many,” and “several.”
- 8. Use parallel structure.** That is, grammatically equal words, in lists:
“On the trip we will go hiking, sightseeing, and fishing.”
Not “On the trip we will go hiking, sightseeing, and fish.”

Writing Exercise: Six-Word Memoirs

Ernest Hemingway was once challenged to write a story in six words. He responded: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

The New York City literary magazine *Smith* asked readers to submit their own six-word memoirs and received thousands, from the bittersweet (“Cursed with cancer, blessed with friends”) to the inspirational (“Business school? Bah! Pop music? Hurrah”). They’ve recently published a series of best-selling books of six-word memoirs including *It All Changed in an Instant* and *Not Quite What I Was Planning*.

Read the miniature memoirs below, and with good grammar in mind, write one—or a few—of your own.

I thought we had more time.

Awkward girl takes chances. Fun ensues.

Three children, three personalities, one headache.

Found myself, lost my hair.

1979: Fled Nicaragua. 2009: Still processing.

I still make coffee for two.

Thought I would have more impact.

Wanted a treehouse; got a bedroom.

New places, new experiences. Worth it.

A bit rough around the edges.

Never enough coins for the meter.

Kicking caffeine; world smells like coffee.

I’ve made mistakes; not one regret.

Optimistic attitude. Still own a Toyota.

Still learning after all these years.

Some are by celebrities, such as chef Mario Batali: Brought it to a boil often.

Writer Nora Ephron: *Secret of life: Marry an Italian.*

Deepak Chopra: *Danced in fields of infinite possibilities.*

Joyce Carol Oates: *Revenge is living well without you.*

BUSINESS WRITING GUIDE

Common Writing Errors and Useful Tools

An A-Z Guide

Adjectival phrases: When a phrase is used as an adjective, it's hyphenated for clarity (*a coast-to-coast direct flight, a happy-go-lucky attitude*).

Clock time: Standard business English style uses a numeral for the hour, followed by a.m. or p.m. ("Confirming our conference call at 9 a.m."). The term *o'clock* has an antiquated feel.

Colons: After a colon, don't begin with a capital letter unless it's a complete sentence.

Compared to/Compared with: *Compared to* is used to indicate a similarity or resemblance ("Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?"). *Compared with* is used to highlight differences ("It's not hot compared to summertime where I'm from").

Complex Words: Don't use them when a simple word will do!

Instead of:

Use:

Aggregate	Total
Ascertain`	Find out
Allocate	Add, Give, Divide, Share
Commence	Start
Consequently	So
Cumulatively	Added together
Discontinue	Stop
Domiciled	Living
Endeavor	Try
Expeditiously	Quickly
Facilitate	Help
Furthermore	Also
Initiate	Begin
Moreover	Also
Nevertheless	But
Notwithstanding	Still
Participate	Take part
Particulars	Details
Precipitate	Cause
Provide assistance	Help
Purchase	Buy
Requirements	Rules
Relocate	Move
Subsequent to	After
Sufficient	Enough
Terminate	End
Transmit	Send
Utilize	Use
Ultimately	Finally

Comprise: “Foreign ministers from Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States, comprise the so-called Contact Group on Bosnia.” No, they do not. The so-called Contact Group on Bosnia *comprises* Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States. The whole thing comprises its constituent parts. The parts compose or make up the whole.

Currently: If something is continuing, that will almost always be clear, making *currently* unnecessary.

Dilemma: The word means a choice between two equally unpleasant options. It is not a synonym for *problem*, *difficulty*, or *predicament*.

Entities: Avoid. Use the most specific word you can instead (*agencies*, *organizations*, *associations*, *groups*).

Facility: Replace with the more specific term (*building*, *campus*, *center*, etc.) Similarly, avoid the vague term *structure*.

Farther/Further: *Farther* refers to a distance (“She’s moving farther away”). *Further* means additional (“I need further information”).

First: *First* (along with other superlatives such as *largest*, *most*, and *only*) must be used with caution, and only when you have personally verified the accuracy.

Following: It is incorrect to use *following* as a preposition in place of *after*. Write, “She will arrive after the meeting,” not “She will arrive following the meeting.”)

Forward/foreword: *Forward* is a direction; a *foreword* is an introduction to a book, the words that come before the main text.

Hark/hearken: To *hark* is to listen; to *hearken* is to heed. To recall an earlier time is to *hark back*, not *hearken back*.

Hyphen:

Infamous: Notorious, not a synonym for famous or well-known.

Jargon: A bad, but common, habit. (Which of the following sentences are more powerful? “Initial client difficulties evolve into ingenuous computing solutions with unparalleled scalability” or “We take clients’ problems and find solutions that can grow as they grow”?) Know your audience. Will they get your technical, insider, or complicated jargon? If you can’t avoid jargon, define unfamiliar terms the first time they appear in the document.

Job titles: These take lower case after the name (Bill Gates, chairman of Microsoft), and upper case before the name (Harvard University President Drew Gilpin Faust). Job descriptions are lower case wherever they appear (pediatrician James Rice).

Lead/led: Lead (pronounced “led”) is a metal. **Lead** (pronounced “leed”) is the verb meaning to direct or guide. **Led** (also pronounced “led”) is the past tense of the verb. Do not be led astray.

OK: It’s informal, but acceptable in standard business language. Don’t spell it *OK* or *okay*.

Ongoing: A continuing action is usually clear in context. Cut, or use *continuing*. (Similarly, don't use *upcoming*; *coming* does fine.)

Passive voice: A key concept for strengthening writing is to weed out the passive voice, which obscures the doer of an action and makes writing cumbersome, confusing, and dull. Passive: The mail was opened by Joe. Active: Joe opened the mail. Passive: The bill was vetoed by the president. Active: The president vetoed the bill.

Positive form beats negative: It's usually simpler and stronger. "He was not on time" becomes "He was late." "She did not remember" becomes "She forgot."

Prepositional phrases to avoid

Instead of:	Use:
Inasmuch as	Because
With regard to	To
With respect to	About
In an effort to	To
In order to	To
For the purpose of	To
For the reason that	Because
During the course of	During
Prior to	Before
On the occasion of	When
Have an ability to	Can
In the event that	If

Redundant phrases. Here are some, with the unneeded words in brackets.

[IN ORDER] to	More [AND MORE]	Fewer [AND FEWER]
heat [UP]	[BASIC] fundamentals	disregard [ALTOGETHER]
[ADVANCE] warning	[ACTUAL] experience	brief [IN DURATION]
few [IN NUMBER]	[COMPLETELY] destroyed	plan [AHEAD]
[MUTUAL] cooperation	filled [TO CAPACITY]	[DESIRABLE] benefits
arrive [ON THE SCENE]	[ABSOLUTELY] clear	each [AND EVERY]
[PAST] experience	continue [TO REMAIN]	merged [TOGETHER]
consensus [OF OPINION]	ask [THE QUESTION]	join [TOGETHER]
depreciate [IN VALUE]	postponed [UNTIL LATER]	[FINAL] conclusion
but [NEVERTHELESS]	adequate [ENOUGH]	[COMPLETE] opposite
assembled [TOGETHER]	[ACTUAL] experience	[ADVANCE] planning
[BASIC] fundamentals	doctorate [DEGREE]	close [PROXIMITY]
[EACH AND] every	each [ONE]	[END] result
estimated [ROUGHLY] at	filled [TO CAPACITY]	never [AT ANY TIME]
[PAST] experience	[REASON IS] because	[REGULAR] routine

Role/roll: A *role* is the part of a character in a play; a *roll* is a list or register.

Sexist pronouns: Avoid masculine pronouns (*he, him, his*) when no gender is involved—rephrase in the plural so you can use *they* and *their*. Alternatively, write *he or she*, but not often; with overuse it becomes cumbersome and distracting.

That: Use when there is a time element after a verb: “He said yesterday that ...” Also use with the following clauses: *That before, that after, that although, that because, that in addition to, that until, that while*. It also must be used with certain verbs: *assert that, contend that, declare that, estimate that, make clear that, point out that, propose that*.

Which: *Which* introduces clauses that are not necessary to the meaning of a sentence, and are usually set off by commas: Marie took the bullet train, which passes through Washington, to get home. The sentence is perfectly clear without the *which* clause.

A Library of Writing Resources

The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Houghton Mifflin)

Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (Merriam-Webster)

The Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual (Perseus Books)

The Chicago Manual of Style (University of Chicago Press)

Explicit Business Writing: Best Practices for the Twenty-First Century (BWC Publications)

The Business Style Handbook (McGraw Hill)

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

Patricia Kantor is passionate about helping people find the proper voice for effective communication. She helps people develop their presentations to deliver powerful messages, all the while instilling a sense of confidence and grace in all her clients.

Patricia originally trained in both South Africa and the United States as a therapist. Working with executives who needed a fresh start, she felt committed to helping people improve themselves and achieve their highest potential and this inspired a change in her career.

In 1995 Patricia founded her own company, Patricia Kantor Associates. Her goal has always been simply this: to help speakers communicate effectively, to craft elegant and relevant presentations, and to deliver them confidently and powerfully.

Over the past years her work has ranged from coaching displaced scholars in Jordan under the auspices of Scholar Rescue Fund of the Institute of International Education, to a return to her native South Africa to work with one of the largest retail chains with over 1,000 stores. Assignments for another of her long time international clients, UNDP, included multinational conferences in Thailand and Indonesia and rewarding work with the UNDP Regional office in Johannesburg. Patricia also partnered with CenterNorth to develop Client Engagement and Presentation Training programs for IT and outsourcing companies in India.

Some recent clients include Chubb Insurance, Gerson Lehrman Group, Optimum Lightpath, Novo Nordisk Pharmaceuticals, United Nations-Development Programs (UNDP), Frenkel & Co, Institute for International Education IIE, Heineken Americas, Aon/AlliedNA, Sotheby's and UBS

Jill Hamburg Coplan is a New Jersey-based reporter, editor and writing instructor with almost two decades of experience teaching and training, and writing about finance and investing, international development and public policy, religion and social conflict. She has been an adjunct professor of journalism at New York University since 2000 and works as a writing coach for executives in various industries, and with high school students on their college essays.

As a publications consultant, she produces reports, client material, radio scripts, newsletters and white papers for clients including UNDP, Girl Scouts USA, Fidelity Investment Management, eBay, Citibank, and American Express Custom Publishing.

Jill began her career with UPI in Jerusalem, and then worked for several years as a stringer for U.S. newspapers including *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *Newsday*, from the Middle East, Africa, and the former Soviet Union including Central Asia. She covered Latin American finance and emerging markets for Bloomberg News, and served as senior editor of *Working Woman* magazine. She is a regular contributor to *BusinessWeek* and a freelancer with *Martha Stewart Living*.