

Guidelines for Writing Documents

01/01/07

Maybe you can help me out. As my business grows, I find myself doing more and more writing. And I'm not sure that I'm doing such a good job. Are there some tips I could follow, that would help me feel more confident?

Business writing is a crucial skill for any business owner. From letters to customers, prospects and vendors, to contracts and agreements, to brochures and website copy, one of the most important things you can do is be able to get your point across in writing. As we move to more and more of an internet world, writing is an often overlooked skill, and one that speaks volumes about the person. So, thanks for the question, let's see how to help you out.

When writing there are several guidelines you want to follow. Know who you're writing to, for which purpose, and match your style to that venue. Never write in anger, and always give important documents time to incubate. Learn to write from an outline, which you use to organize your thoughts. When writing technical or legal documents, be sure to have your facts checked by someone with the appropriate expertise.

When writing for business, your style can range from semi-informal to highly structured. In general, I like to keep a balance between the two ends of the spectrum, not presuming

familiarity, but allowing the person on the receiving end to perceive me as warm, friendly and willing to lend a hand.

Knowing your audience is key to the communication process. What is it that will excite them, intrigue them or otherwise get them involved? How will this communication impact them and how can you make that impact a positive one? Not all information is positive, however, it can be beneficial, to make them more efficient, safer or more productive. If you are asking them to do something describe how it will benefit them. Change is not easy for most people, so it is important that you correspond to your reader in a way that will encourage him to make that change. Consider the readers position in the organization and the knowledge that they have. Don't bore them with facts that they already know but, at the same time don't use terminology that they may not be familiar with. If your audience is made up of a mixed population, make sure you are understood by the least informed. The idea is that you must look at what you are writing from the readers point of view. You may have preconceived ideas about the topic, you may have strong feelings about the topic, you may have a certain level of knowledge about the topic, but where does your reader stand? It is beneficial to know before you start to write.

Knowing the purpose for your writing is also important for the development of a letter or memo. What is it that you hope to accomplish? What is the point or the outcome you are trying to achieve? Are you relating information, explaining a new procedure, or persuading them to do something? Knowing how you want your reader to use the communication will determine how you present it. You may think you are just relating information when you introduce a new service to your company, when in fact, what you really want to do is to persuade your employees to use it. Determine your purpose before you begin to write.

The structure of your writing may take several different forms depending on the purpose for your writing. If you are giving the reader information you might simply write out the basic fundamentals beginning with the most important and ending with the least important. Breaking your information down into several parts of a whole may also be an approach – say it is a Human Resources issue you may want to group it related to part time employees vs. hourly vs. salaried people. In explaining a new procedure you might use a chronological form. Describe what needs to be done first second and third. If, however, you are trying to persuade your reader to act or respond in a certain way you may want to start with a description of the problem

Guidelines for Writing Documents

01/01/07

or situation and then give your proposal for addressing it.

When writing a technical document, be sure to keep your audience's interest, by talking about real world examples. When writing a proposal, try not to cover every base – you can't possibly. Hit the highlights, using the proposal to clarify what you've already discussed, and leaving the door open for further discussion.

If it is important enough to say, it's probably worth taking your time to think through, and edit what you're saying. Don't wait until the last minute to start putting your thoughts in writing. Mull it over in your head, make a few notes, let it sit, get back to it, and work on it some more.

If you are addressing a stressful issue, anything from taking a vendor to task, to getting an employee to recognize there are problems, to addressing the concerns of a major customer, resist the temptation to dash something off. Instead, take the time to reflect on what's really going on. Make some notes on issues you want to address. Identify key words or phrases that are likely to be useful as you try to get your point across. And above all, leave your reader with the belief that you are interested in getting feedback. I always like to end my letters with an invitation to call me to discuss things further.

The internet can be your best friend, but also your worst enemy. I think almost all of us have had something go out, that at one time or another we wish we could recall. Unfortunately, you can't recall things once you hit the send button, so take your time.

When getting ready to write, lay out a quick outline. 4 – 5 bullets should do it. Have one main topic for each paragraph. Stick to that topic, don't wander. Your first paragraph should be the clincher. In it give them a purpose to continue. You must quickly get to the point, be relevant and perk their interest. Make sure you're offering them something they want to know about with a reward or benefit of some kind to them. Remember you are taking their time and you want them to listen to you. And then, make it easy for the reader to follow you by telling them what's coming, and by wrapping up.

Don't try to cover too much ground at one time. One rule I was taught to follow when I was in Corporate, was: 1 page or less. If you can't say it in 1 page, edit it down, until you get to the essence of the issue. Personally, I found it hard to get to just one page, there always seemed like there was so much more to say. However, think about your audience, and your own reaction to documents you've received. Most of us are so busy that if a document goes on for more than a few paragraphs, we're likely to

glaze over and lose interest. Don't risk losing your reader along the way. Leave your audience curious and coming back for more.

Technical and legal writing are especially difficult, because the content is tough to get through. You may have to use a specific structure, and you may not be entirely comfortable with that structure. If you're going to do a lot of this kind of writing, you'll probably find it gets easier with practice. But by all means, make sure you start with a template that an expert in the field has proven works, and then have someone check your work before you get ready to publish.

Looking for a good book? Try Webster's New World Business Writing Handbook, by Richard Worth

Ask Andi

Trusted Advisor to Business Owners

Guidelines for Writing Documents

01/01/07

Business owners regularly turn to Ask Andi and Strategy Leaders for advice on how to grow profitable, successful companies. They find what they need time after time. Specific advice is available at www.AskAndiBlog.com. Ask Andi is also published weekly in the Westchester and Fairfield County Business Journals and Hudson Valley Business. Written by Strategy Leaders President, Andi Gray, the Ask Andi column is a rich source of advice for owners of established, privately held businesses.

If you are a business owner and you have a question or would like to discuss some aspect of your business, call [1.877.238.3535](tel:18772383535) or send an email to AskAndi@StrategyLeaders.com.