

Getting Down to Business: 3 Tips to Better Writing

By Dianna Booher

Are you having trouble drafting an important email or letter? If so, you're not alone. When I ask participants in our writing workshops to list problems they encounter in writing, I most frequently hear "getting started" and "knowing exactly what I want to say." Effective documents don't just happen. They take thought and planning.

One of the most important keys in writing business letters, reports, proposals, and email is knowing the audience and writing for their interest. Know their hot buttons—how best to inform, educate, or persuade them.

Don't Just Say "No"

Maintaining good relationships with vendors is crucial. You may not need a supplier today, but you may be on their doorstep begging next month. Suppose the quality of your current supplier's product declines, and you can't find a replacement part anywhere else.

Generally, giving a direct but positive reason for your turn-down is a good idea. For example, if a vendor's price is too high, explain that you've chosen another vendor for your project because new suppliers meet your budget and timeline.

Don't Equate Courtesy with Vagueness

Be specific. When writing across department lines, people fear to sound too demanding. As a result, they become vague. Instead of writing, "I need this report by April 15," they write "I need this report ASAP." The peer's interpretation of "ASAP" often differs from yours. Be explanatory, not arbitrary.

Cut to the Chase

Always state your bottom-line message first so that your reader doesn't have to read half-way through the document to find its essence. For example, say, "I recommend that we purchase the XYZ software at the price quoted by Vendor X." Then explain the reasons for your recommendation. For example, "I have examined the software of Vendors X, Y, and Z, and I believe that Vendor X's product not only fits our budget, but is also superior for the following reasons"

Your writing characterizes you in much the same way your voice does. Consider your own reaction to a phone call from someone you've never met. Your telephone-voice characterization of the person may be highly inaccurate, as you've probably discovered after meeting him or her in person. Nevertheless, most of us continue to jump to inaccurate conclusions. Make sure that people don't jump to invalid conclusions about your technical competence because of poorly written letters, emails, proposals, or reports.

Your writing is a reflection of your company's character on the page or screen. A disorganized and unclear document creates doubts about both your product and your company. Consider the image you portray each time you hit "send."

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For more on business writing, see E-Writing: 21st-Century Tools for Effective Communication (Simon & Schuster/Pocket Books) by Dianna Booher.