

Write Your Way Out of the Garbage Bin

by

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Email in-boxes have become the postal boxes of a decade ago. They contain circulars, coupons, invoices, and the occasional greeting card. If your email to others doesn't command attention, it gets deleted or dragged into oblivion with a click.

To compound the problem of a crammed in-box, many, if not most, emails are poorly written—often requiring a second or third reading. The biggest complaint we hear voiced in our writing workshops is that emails are disorganized, irrelevant, and contain incomplete information.

Clearly, your competency shows up in someone else's in-box. The ability to write well not only documents your accomplishments—it also reflects your ability to think clearly.

Forget the “Once Upon a Time” Format

“Once upon a time” opens many classic bedtime stories, but marks an amateur business document. Your clients, boss, or colleagues aren't reading for pleasure, so don't keep them in suspense. Start with “they lived happily ever after” or “we need your help to live happily ever after” (the overview message and action), and then circle back and give readers any necessary background details to take expected action or make a decision.

Know When to Blink: Fade Away Favorably

The head honcho strolls in late to a meeting, keeping everyone waiting. Or, she has the last word before a dramatic exit, leaving everyone scurrying to carry out the last command. Have an argument at home, and the same dynamic happens. The husband

grabs his coat and exits with a terse, “I’m going to Atlanta.” Done. Gone. So there.

The same dynamic happens in email conversations when one writer stops responding. The implication is rejection: Done. Gone. I’ve more important things to do than email you about silly little matters like this. Why don’t you get on with your life and leave me alone?

On the other hand, you can feel a little silly carrying on an email conversation like this:

“Our proposal to Universal is due on Friday. Please let me know when you’ve submitted it.”

“I sent it out last Tuesday.”

“Good. I’m hoping they make a decision before I leave for vacation next week.”

“Yes, me too.”

“Please copy me on any further correspondence with their proposal team.”

“Will do. Sure thing.”

“Thank you.”

“Welcome.”

Three quick tips to handle such a dilemma: (1) If the message is positive, assume all is well. If the message context is negative, spend the extra few seconds to reply and spare an offense. (2) Reduce the length of your response. A single word or phrase response implies “So long, I’m signing off now.” (3) Repeat the action—yours or theirs. You’re implying that one or the other of you should “jump right on it” and have no further time to email.

Know What Never to Put in an Email

Ask any 10 people if they know of someone who has been terminated or an organization that has been hauled into court over an email, and at least one can cite

person and case. The story usually has an unhappy ending. Here are the no-no's:

1. Negative comments about executive management (Even if “deleted,” these emails can be retrieved. Often such remarks accidentally get passed on. After four replies on an ongoing saga, someone forgets your sarcastic line buried at the bottom and accidentally forwards the email to another colleague to answer a different question.)
2. Criticism regarding peer or staff performance issues (Written comments cause employees to brood. They seem more official than spoken words.)
3. Bonuses or salary issues (If positive plans fail to materialize, the writing seems like “proof” that they are deserved.)
4. Racial or gender slurs (Surely not in this century.)
5. Product or service liabilities (Opponents can subpoena your emails as evidence that you were aware of problems and ignored warnings.)
6. Competitor untruths (See you in court.)
7. Gossip about colleagues (Even the most innocent “news” can strike people the wrong way. If they want it told, they’ll tell it.)
8. Sloppy writing (Clear writing reflects clear thinking. The opposite is also true. Your image may depend on daily, informal email more than on formal documents.)
9. Humor—particularly sarcasm and tongue-in-cheek (What comes across well with proper inflection, a smile, and a slap on the back frequently falls flat on the screen.)
10. Anything about your personal life you’d be embarrassed to have printed on

the front page of your newspaper (Your love life, your weekend adventures, your political views. Nada.)

Pay Attention to Punctuation and Grammar

Consider the sad fate of the toothless tiger who zaps an email like the following into your in-box:

Its come to my attention that several employee's have been parking in the Visitor Parking Lot in spite of regulations that prohibit that. We have sufficient employee space acrossed the street and violations of parking policy will not be excused or excepted. We have made this policy clear in recent staff meetings we will have security officers ticket those who park illegally. thank you for your consideration.

Who's got the power? Certainly not this manager. The person who sends out such an error-filled document becomes a laughingstock rather than a leader.

Incorrect punctuation and poor grammar can take you to court, cost you untold dollars, and even change the meaning of your prose. For example, the use of *may* and *shall* became a topic of discussion during the U.S. 2000 presidential election. Was the word choice in the election laws of the State of Florida a matter of inconsistency and ungrammatical usage or a correct and purposeful choice of words to convey strictly different meanings? Both George W. Bush and Al Gore made use of the grammatical arguments in their legal briefs filed in court.

The ability to write clearly is no small matter. Similar grammar issues determine the outcome of legal cases involving millions of dollars every day in corporate America. And, unfortunately, grammar determines clarity, rework, and productivity—whether supplies show up in Pittsburgh or Peoria.

Those who write and speak competently get attention. They earn promotions and respect as leaders. Craft your email with care so that the words on your screen reflect the logic, clarity, and mental competence that you want people to associate you with.

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Excerpted from *The Voice of Authority: 10 Communication Strategies Every Leader Needs to Know* by Dianna Booher (McGraw-Hill, June 2007). Dianna Booher is CEO of Booher Consultants, a communication training firm, and author of more than 40 books. www.booher.com 800-342-6621