

**THE TRUTH
ABOUT**

THE NEW RULES OF BUSINESS WRITING

“Communicate what
you mean to
get what you want...”

Natalie Canavor / Claire Meirowitz
Founders of C&M Business Writing Services

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Foreword: A new way to think about writing

Do you wonder why your messages don't work the way you want, and whether there's a better way to write them? There is. And we're going to show you exactly how to do it.

This book's goal is to make you a good business writer.

What do we mean by *business writer*? Not someone who earns a living as a writer, but anyone who writes for business purposes. You might turn out e-mails, letters, and reports as part of your everyday work in the corporate, nonprofit, or government worlds. You might be an entrepreneur or a professional—perhaps a lawyer, accountant, educator, scientist, artist—who writes proposals or articles as well as e-mails and marketing materials and blogs.

Whoever you are, writing can give you a powerful competitive edge. It can help you achieve your goals, work more efficiently, and persuade other people to your viewpoint. Even more: Good writing will help you be a better leader.

The strategies that *The Truth About the New Rules of Business Writing* demonstrates are based on the best ideas about practical writing, recast to work in today's fast-paced digitized world. Learn these ideas, and you're ready to write successfully not only for today's print and electronic media, but for whatever new communication vehicles emerge in our evolving business world.

On the Web

Visit this book's Web site at www.ftpress.com/title/9780137153152 to register this book and access bonus material, including reference sections on formatting, style sheets, and resources.

Introduction

Good Writing: What's in It for You?

Good writing is a big advantage in today's business world. You know that or you wouldn't be reading this book. But much more than you might imagine, effective writing can be your personal key to success.

Look around your own work environment: You'll likely find that good writers tend to get promoted, whatever their field. You may also observe that many business leaders write powerfully. That's not an accident—writing is a leadership skill, and can be just as important to success as good face-to-face skills.

When does good writing make a difference? *Always*. Every message you send matters.

Good writing is the road to more credibility, better professional image, and successful results. That can translate into more clients, enhanced relationships, bigger profits, and promotions. Because more and more of our work is accomplished through writing rather than in person, we depend on our writing skills to persuade, collaborate, manage, and lead.

Good writing works. In fact, this is a useful way to define good writing in the business environment: It accomplishes what you want it to do.

So how can you gain the advantage of writing well, a skill that few of us were lucky enough to learn in school or on the job? Use the tools we're sharing with you and absorb the ideas. We promise this will transform your writing, and your attitude toward writing.

Our decades as professional writers and workshop presenters have taught us that most intelligent people need only two things to write successfully:

- First, you need a clear idea of what good writing looks like and sounds like *today*—not according to outdated 20th-century models.
- Second, you need a system to think through any writing challenge you're faced with, from e-mails to proposals, reports, Web site copy, blogs, and much more. Based on our combined experience

as journalists, corporate communicators, and editors, we've created a step-by-step strategy that takes you from the very beginning to the end, guiding you to produce a piece of writing that accomplishes exactly what you want—without any agony.

This book is written expressly for adults in the business world, and it's based on methods that have nothing to do with traditional ways of teaching.

Here's the inside story on good writing: You don't have to spend days or weeks or years drilling on grammar, punctuation, and spelling. If you want to play baseball, mastering the rules is useless if you can't catch the ball or hit it. Writing is not about rules either—essentially it's about thinking.

The importance of good writing isn't something that gets talked about a lot. Most people don't notice the quality of the writing they see—they simply react positively, negatively, or not at all. They may not read the piece, or may skim it. They may fail to understand the message, or find it unpersuasive.

That's why there is growing recognition that writing is an essential business skill. Poorly written communications fail to explain a company's products, values, and messages—or worse, describe them in a negative manner. Competitive advantage is lost, and so are opportunities to connect with customers, colleagues, and collaborators. Business efficiency is sacrificed.

Don't think American industry hasn't noticed. A few years ago, a blue-ribbon group called the National Writing Commission surveyed top business leaders and found that poor employee writing is such a big problem that companies spend more than \$3 billion per year trying to improve it. Their report was called, "Writing: A Ticket to Work...Or a Ticket Out," and documented the importance of writing in decisions to hire and promote, especially in high-growth industries.

What does that mean to you? *Opportunity.* We invite you to take advantage of all the writing experience and expertise that we've built into these pages. They'll equip you to write powerfully for today's business media and help you succeed in today's competitive business environment.



TRUTH

1

Most people aim for the
wrong target

There's an old saying, "If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there." Or, if you like sports analogies better: "It's much easier to hit a target you can see."

Most of us never learned to write for practical purposes. Early in our school years we were drilled on mastering grammar and punctuation, and in high school and college, usually practiced a literary style suitable for academic essays.

Then we enter the business world, and unless we're lucky enough to find a writing mentor, we encounter few good models to light the way. Most people write carelessly, using old-fashioned, outdated styles that are ill suited to today's tempo and spirit. So we muddle along without knowing how to improve our own written communication.

Does this matter? Yes! Because it produces writing that doesn't work—meaning it fails to accomplish our goals.

So the first step in writing-for-results is to describe the characteristics of strong writing. Having a clear vision of the target is a huge part of getting there, and it enables you to apply skills you already own but may never have thought about.

Mastering rules and imitating outdated models will not make you a powerful writer. Understand what works and apply that knowledge to everything you write.

Define good writing yourself

We're sure you know more about good writing than you think. Try this: Make a list of everything you don't like about other people's writing, whether in books, newspapers, e-mails, letters, newsletters, on the Web, in blogs, and so on.

To start you off, here are some of the characteristics that come up on most lists when we do this as a group activity:

- Hard to understand
- Boring
- Confusing
- Illogical
- Wordy
- Message obscure
- Purpose unclear
- Hard to read aloud

Add as many characteristics to this list as you can—and you’ve defined bad writing! For more descriptors to expand your personal list, see the “bad writing” rundown later in this chapter, drawn from our workshop participants.

Next: What happens when these negative words or phrases are reversed to make them positive? The preceding words or phrases might reverse this way:

- Easy to understand
- Concise
- Interesting
- Message obvious
- Clear
- Purpose obvious
- Logical
- Easy to read aloud

Take your full expanded list of negatives and reverse them.

Now you’ve successfully defined good writing and know what to aim for. You need only to believe in your definition and that it works for every purpose. This alone will immediately put you way ahead of most people.

Notice that incorrect spelling, punctuation, and grammar might not even have come up on your “bad” list, or may have turned up at the end. Instinctively, people know that technical know-how doesn’t define good writing, although it matters because technical mistakes interfere with clarity and understanding. Today your computer programs can give you plenty of help with the technicalities—we’ll show you how to use that support effectively.

Bad writing: the whole sad story

- Annoying “style” that interferes with the message
- Can’t tell at whom it’s aimed
- Ambiguous
- Repetitive
- Doesn’t hold your attention
- Uninteresting word choice
- Can’t tell why you should care
- No detail to back up ideas or generalizations
- Makes the reader spend time figuring out the meaning
- Vague
- Dense—no breathing room for reader to absorb information
- Pompous

- Connections between ideas and facts not clear
- No rhythm
- Stilted and awkward
- Rambles
- Full of clichés
- Too much—or too little—information to make the point
- Makes leaps, without helping reader to follow
- Feels passive
- Unconvincing—full of empty claims, unpersuasive
- Full of jargon of any kind—academic, scientific, business, and so forth
- Doesn't deliver what it promised
- Bad grammar and structure
- Misspelled words
- Incorrect word use

Good writing: a definition to live by

- Invisible style that lets the message shine through
- Unambiguous
- Holds attention
- Makes it obvious why you should care
- Audience it's written for is obvious
- No repetitions—words, ideas, examples
- Interesting word choice
- Right level of detail
- Allows breathing space, easy to absorb
- Feels natural
- Has natural rhythm
- Flows smoothly
- Stays on point
- No clichés
- Right amount of information to support points
- Logical connections
- Feels active
- Persuasive
- No empty rhetoric—backs up all claims
- No jargon

