

# Bad grammar, jargon, slang and stupid jokes: How to avoid writing your way out of a job

by Jim Gray

A senior executive I know recently met with a management consultant to listen to a sales pitch. The executive liked what he heard, but his opinion changed quickly after he received a follow-up letter from the consultant.

It was a mess – disorganized, with several spelling and grammatical errors, and enough words to fill a small novel.

The executive had seen enough. He rejected the proposal, and the consultant.

How well you write says a lot about you. Unfortunately, many in the workplace are saying bad things about themselves.

They're producing emails, letters and memos that are jumbled, laden with self-interest and much too long.

The result? They confuse and irritate their readers, and contribute to a further decline in the quality and effectiveness of business correspondence.

You can ensure that you're always communicating with clarity and efficiency by following the top 10 rules for business writing success.

## 1. THINK BEFORE YOU WRITE

Effective correspondence begins before you start writing. Take the time to consider what you want to accomplish with your communication, and what that achievement would look like.

If you aren't clear about your objective, how will your readers be?

Every productive minute you invest in planning pays significant dividends once you get to the writing stage. That's where the magic happens – or should.

## 2. DIAL IN W-I-I-F-M

They're the call letters for everyone's favourite radio station: What's In It For Me?

Everyone asks that question. The sooner you can provide the answer in your emails, letters and memos, the better response you'll get.

Find out as much as you practically can about those on the receiving end of your communication. Then put yourself in their position: What's their state of mind? What motivates them? How can you serve their needs while attaining your goal?

The more you can focus your correspondence on your readers, the more persuasive your message will be.

## 3. BE SPECIFIC

Use reader-focused words such as "you" and "yours." Get to the point quickly and be specific about the purpose of your correspondence.

Your most important information should come first, a principle called front-end load. Whether it's good news, or bad, get it

out right off the top. If you delay conveying bad news, your readers will feel manipulated, or – if they're reading as quickly as many stressed employees do these days – miss the information altogether.

#### **4. KEEP IT TIGHT AND BRIGHT**

Never have so many in the workplace waded through so much bad copy – and bailed out before finishing it. We've become highly selective in determining what we read, and how long we're willing to read it for.

To ensure your e-mails are opened, make sure your subject lines are reader-focused and action-oriented.

Limit your content to information that serves the interests of the recipient. You can always write long to get your thoughts out on the computer screen, then cut short.

#### **5. GO FOR VISUAL APPEAL**

There's nothing more daunting than opening a document thick with text, and few paragraph breaks.

Make sure your correspondence is visually appealing by providing plenty of white space, which enhances attention and retention.

Use headings and subheadings to organize material simply and clearly. If you need to refer to several elements or factors, enumerate them in a reader-friendly list.

#### **6. USE PROPER ENGLISH**

Abbreviations, short-forms and slang aren't appropriate in business correspondence, whether hard copy or e-mail.

Use full and proper names, terms and references. Make your language accessible to readers by minimizing the use of jargon. If you have to use a highly technical word or phrase, provide a definition.

Ensure that spelling and grammar are correct.

#### **7. BE MORE FORMAL**

You can never go wrong when you write more formally in business. It elevates your correspondence – and you.

Forget about the salutation "Hi". You're not in high school.

The word "guys" should be banned from all forms of written, and, for that matter, verbal communication.

When writing to someone you don't know for the first time, use Mr. or Ms. If, in future, the recipient wants you to use his or her first name, you'll be informed.

Sending jokes to professional colleagues will guarantee that over time you'll offend someone. Share your humour with trusted friends – in person.

#### **8. USE POSITIVE LANGUAGE**

Employ strong, upbeat words in a narrative that will galvanize your readers and conveys your enthusiasm and can-do spirit. Use words like accomplish, achieve, benefit, commit and lead.

Minimize negative-based words like alleged, can't, claim, fail and wrong.

Always end your correspondence with a positive, or at least a reference to an agreement or some shared common ground, especially if you have bad news to communicate.

#### **9. ISSUE A CALL TO ACTION**

Too many business emails, letters and memos simply drop off a cliff at the end, leaving their recipients mystified about the entire purpose of the communication.

Your need to conclude by telling your readers what it is you want them to do. Is it to buy your product, test your service or attend your meeting? If you don't tell them, they won't know.

## **10. NEVER SEND IN HASTE**

Keep in mind that the irate e-mail you send today will exist long after you're gone.

Carefully consider the best form of communication. Deal with contentious issues in person, and if that's not possible, speak personally by telephone.

When drafting an important e-mail, print off a copy and edit. You'll almost always be able to make improvements.

You are, after all, telling your readers a lot about yourself. And you want to be sure it's good, all good.