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PRINTtips



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Let's Keep in Touch... Lessons for Business Writing

A fundamental task of every business is to communicate with customers and prospects. This may take the form of educational or sales information (newsletter, brochure, direct mail marketing material, advertising, sales letter) or may be central to the business's products and services (technical manual, instructions for use, specifications sheet). In either case, the effectiveness of the writing is crucial in persuading people to buy or helping people understand.

In this issue of Printtips we will present some methods for improving your business writing skills so your information will be read and kept. We'll be emphasizing general writing skills, including grammar, punctuation, spelling, and style, as this is applicable no matter what your writing task.

Expository versus persuasive writing

Most businesses need to master two kinds of writing skills: *expository*, meaning writing that has as its primary goal to present information on a topic; and *persuasive*, writing that is intended to lead the audience to form an opinion and take an action. Educational and technical writing is an example of *exposition*; sales-related material is an example of *persuasion*.

Even though there is a difference in focus between expository and persuasive writing, both share some common characteristics:

- a focus on the audience
- the benefits that will accrue to the user
- credibility
- a call to action



A basic requirement of all business writing is to understand the audience – who exactly the written material is intended for. The audience affects many decisions about writing style including the reading and comprehension level (*i.e.*, can be understood by someone with an eighth grade reading level); voice (active or passive); person (first or third; singular or plural); and vocabulary.

As the reader progresses through the written material, he must quickly come to understand what benefit will be derived from continuing to read. In persuasive writing, this concept is often illustrated by reminding writers to translate product features into customer benefits. Though not as obvious, it is also important in technical writing to gain and hold the reader's interest by providing a benefit: keep reading and you'll know how to operate the equipment or perform the task.

In both expository and persuasive writing, the reader must be certain about the credibility of

Let's Keep in Touch (continued)

“...developing a brochure describing a technically sophisticated product...”

“The answer to resolving these conflicts is to fully define the topic...”

the business offering the product or service. For technical writing, this can be accomplished with a statement of corporate capabilities or qualifications; for sales-related material it occurs through logically-developed and believable statements of differentiation.

Finally, all business writing needs to include a *call to action* – a specific set of instructions to the reader of what to do next.

Balancing facts and creativity

There is a natural tension between writing copy that is technically accurate and writing copy that is persuasive. Particularly when developing a brochure describing a technically sophisticated product, a copywriter may be faced with competing demands from the technical and sales staff.

A company's technical staff may prefer to have the brochure filled with facts, details, and conditional statements, citing the need for full disclosure and honesty in representing the product. Simultaneously, the sales staff may prefer to present the product in the most appealing way, leaving the explanation of details and exceptions to the actual selling process. A third tension may come into play when copywriters and graphic designers develop a creative design or a clever or humorous play on words that is not congruent with the intended audience or the product itself.

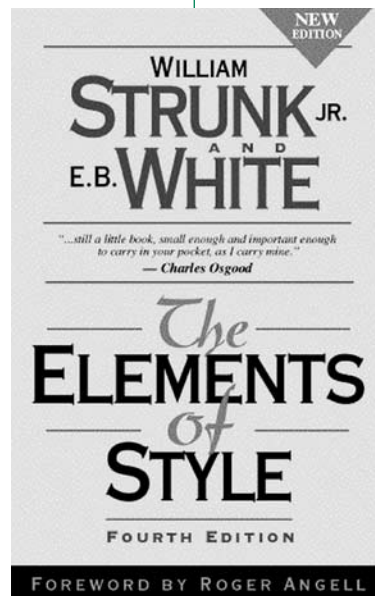
The answer to resolving these conflicts is to fully define the topic of the written material. Is its purpose to present a solution? Describe a product or service? Introduce a new concept? Illustrate a new use or application for the product or service? When the technical staff can define the topic and the sales staff understands the audience, then the creative staff can design effective materials.

The answer lies in discussing three major topics: the audience, the product, and the company offering the product. Of these, the company is the

least important. Because the prospect is primarily interested in solving a problem or filling a need, the copy must first discuss the product and how it relates to the prospect's problems and needs. Company manufacturing capability, delivery, and after-sale service is of secondary importance.

The role of style in business writing

All business writers need to be familiar with the best-known guide to American English writing: *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White. Often referred to as *Strunk and White*, the book was first written in 1918 by Cornell University professor William Strunk Jr. In 43 pages, Strunk presented guidelines for “cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English.”



Following Strunk's death in 1946, Macmillan and Company commissioned the American writer, poet, and *New Yorker* columnist E.B. White to revise the book. His revision was published in 1959; two more followed (in 1972 and 1979).

The fourth edition appeared in 1999 (after White's death) and contained a foreword by E.B. White's stepson Roger Angell, a glossary, and an index and editing by an anonymous editor. The most recent release (2005) is based on the 1999 text with added design and illustration.

The original edition contained eight elementary rules of usage, ten elementary principles for composition, “a few matters of form,” and a list of commonly misused words and expressions. In the 1959 edition, E.B. White updated and extended these sections, and added an essay and a concluding chapter called *An Approach to Style*.

The Elements of Style remains the most popular and often-required guide to proper use of American English. A small book of only 105 pages, it is available in paperback or hardcover at most bookstores or online. We heartily recommend it to all business writers.

Good Writing Begins With an Idea

No matter what your writing assignment – newsletter copy, brochure, display ad, sales presentation, direct marketing letter, or technical literature – good writing begins with an idea. And a great source of ideas is a swipe file.

A swipe file is a collection of items that you find interesting or eye catching such as

- creative, attention-getting ads
- competitors' printed materials
- great promotional ideas

- excellent examples of promotional and direct mail marketing
- reference or resource list
- paper samples
- graphics and cartoons

A swipe file costs nothing to create and may give you just the creative boost you need to get your ideas flowing or to break a writer's block. Remember, though, that a swipe file is only for ideas. You still have to write the copy in your own words and not plagiarize from the work of others.



“... a great source of ideas is a swipe file.”

Q. I'm intrigued by Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*. Exactly what will I find in the book?

A. The book contains a surprisingly small number of rules and principles, all of which are easy to understand. The charm of the book comes from its unique tone and the wittiness of the explanations and examples that accompany each rule and principle.

Here are the eight elementary rules of usage:

1. Form the possessive singular of nouns with 's.
2. In a series of three or more terms with a single *conjunction*, use a comma after each term except the last.
3. Enclose *parenthetic expressions* between commas.

4. Place a comma before *and* or *but* introducing an *independent clause*.
5. Do not join *independent clauses* by a comma.
6. Do not break sentences in two.
7. A *participial phrase* at the beginning of a sentence must refer to the *grammatical subject*.
8. Divide words at line-ends, in accordance with their formation and pronunciation.

Here are the ten elementary principles of composition:

1. Make the paragraph the unit of composition: one paragraph to each topic.
2. As a rule, begin each paragraph with a topic sentence; end it in conformity with the beginning.
3. Use the active voice.
4. Put statements in positive form.
5. Omit needless words.
6. Avoid a succession of loose sentences.
7. Express coordinate ideas in similar form.
8. Keep related words together.
9. In summaries, keep to one tense.
10. Place the emphatic words of a sentence at the end.



“...examples that accompany each rule and principle.”

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Plurals and Possessives

A source of great confusion for many writers is how to correctly form plural and possessive nouns. (A *noun* is a part of speech that indicates a person, place, or thing.) Nouns can be either *singular*, meaning one, or *plural*, meaning more than one. The term *possessive* indicates ownership.

To form the plural of a noun, add an *s* at the end: *birds*. To form the possessive of most singular nouns, add an apostrophe and an *s*: *the bird's nest*. To form the possessive of a plural noun that ends in *s*, add only an apostrophe: *the birds' nest*. To form the plural of a singular noun that ends in *s*, add either an apostrophe and *s* or only an *s*, depending on what sounds best: *the boss's desk*; *Mr. Jones' car*.

The possessive pronouns and adjectives *yours*, *his*, *hers*, *ours*, *its*, *theirs*, and *whose* do not have an apostrophe. Note that a common error is to use *it's* for the possessive of *it*; however, *it's* is actually a contraction of *it is* or *it has*. Similarly, the plural of numerals is formed by added *s*, not *'s*:



100s of drawings (not 100's of drawings).

In his book *The Language Instinct*, Steven Pinker demonstrates the importance of correctly forming plurals and possessives:

my sister's friend's investments (I have one sister and she has one friend.)

my sisters' friends' investments (I have many sisters and they have many friends.)

my sisters' friend's investments (I have many sisters and they have one friend.)

my sister's friends' investments (I have one sister and she has many friends.)

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