

If you want to take things further I'd be happy to help you, of course. But if you'd rather work alone, you'll find a collection of useful and inspirational links – style guides, book recommendations and timeless advice from George Orwell (Eric Blair) – at www.tebbo.com/links/

Further help

The needs of each audience will vary. What I've suggested here will work well, but your instincts might suggest a better way for a particular audience. Trust your judgement.

Trust your instincts

Tebbo's Tips for Business Writers will set you on the right path. Treat it as a guide rather than a collection of rules.

- can talk
- know what you're talking about
- know your typical reader

I strongly believe that you're well on the way to becoming a good writer if you:

Get on the right path

Business readers don't want to waste time trying to find information nuggets buried in seams of rich prose. They want to understand your points quickly and clearly. I'd like to help you improve your business writing. These pages contain a distillation of what I've learnt over several decades of editing and business writing in magazines, newspapers, websites, social media and commercial publications.

Poor writing costs time and money

Tebbo's Tips for Business Writers

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Your reader

The reader is the most important person in the world to you – not your boss, your teacher, your marketing people, or anyone else who tries to persuade you otherwise. Always know the answer to the reader's unspoken question, "But what's in it for me?" Or the shorter version, "Who cares?"

Please the reader and you'll please everyone, especially when the reader does what you hoped they'd do. (Click a link, spend some money with you, 'like' your contribution or share it with others...)

Tone, voice and style

Tone is the mood of a piece. Passionate in a blog and neutral in a press release, for example.

Voice is how you want to present yourself – formal, friendly, casual and so on. Casual and friendly pieces might be sprinkled with abbreviations and colloquialisms – you're and didn't, for example. Formal spells words in full and sticks to good English.

Style is the sum of all the grammatical, structural, linguistic and formatting elements that engage the reader. (Or frighten them away.)

Hook the reader's interest

Your primary job is to capture and keep the reader's interest. In all writing, shorter, snappier sentences at the start pique the reader's interest more quickly.

Online, offline and email are different. So are **press releases, articles, news stories, web pages** and **Tweets**.

Online has to appeal to search engines as well as people. So give early prominence to key information. Headlines set reader expectations and help search engines. Pack as much as possible into the first 40 characters. (This is good advice for email Subject lines too – they're sometimes truncated.)

Printed article titles can be more whimsical because they work with the sub-head, cross-heads (used to identify sections in long articles) images and body copy to capture the reader's interest.

In a **press release**, put key information in the first paragraph – the what, who, where and when, at least. The why and the how will follow close behind.

Features or **blogs** can start more obliquely, with some context-setting before getting to the meat of the story. Always respect your reader's time and don't ramble on.

Tweets are short, to the point, helpful if possible, often link elsewhere and give credit to others.

Keep the reader's interest

Make sure you sprinkle interesting snippets through longer articles rather than deliver all the good stuff up front.

Readers like:

- **action**
- **an easy read**
- **stories**
- **images**

Action: Don't be passive. Put subject and verb near the front of your sentences. ("The girl ate the apple" not "The apple was eaten by the girl.")

9

Easy read: Write clearly, in plain English and avoid long words if possible. Vary sentence and paragraph lengths to avoid boring the reader. Stick to one idea per sentence and one theme per paragraph. An average sentence length of 15 to 20 words is fine for business writing.

Stories: Bring your story to life with anecdotes, analogies and quotes. ("Journalists ignore ninety percent of press releases because the headlines fail to interest them.")

Images: Include graphics, bullets and 'pull-quotes' if you can – they make the page easier on the eye and can convey information more quickly than narrative.

10

Use the right words

Be original when possible and avoid **clichés** and popular business **jargon**:

- doubling down
- bandwidth
- 2.0
- 24 x 7 x 365 is plain wrong

Dump **superfluous adverbs** (they often end in 'ly'):

- *Absolutely* correct
- Grinned *happily*
- Shone *brightly*
- Droned *tediously*

11

Watch out for **tricky words**:

- its/it's
- lose/loose
- discrete/discreet
- focused (one 's')
- affect/effect
- less (cement)/fewer (bricks)

Be sensitive:

- Use they/their, not he/his
- Flight attendant not steward/ess
- "Muslim appearance" is meaningless
- Don't hype or exaggerate

12

Research and sequence

Research to the point at which you're comfortable with the general sweep of your topic.

Then you can choose whether to start with headline, first paragraph, conclusion or body copy – any of the first three will help you focus your mind.

On the other hand, if you bash out the body copy first, with a general purpose in mind, it will probably help you do a better job with the other three. I leave the headline until last – no matter how brilliant, the sub-editor will probably rewrite it anyway.

13

First draft

Write quickly and from the heart. Don't try to edit as you go along, it will inhibit your flow. Just get the words down, noting where you may need more information. Then fill in the gaps. (Remember to keep an eye on word count – you'll often have a target.)

At this point it's best to print your draft and go through it with an editor's hat on – Does it flow? Is it in a logical sequence? Does it contain redundant information? Would bullets or illustrations help? And so on.

I find it much easier to spot weaknesses on paper than on the computer screen.

14

Check the details

Once edited, print it again if necessary. Then check spelling, punctuation, grammar yourself. (Don't rely on your word processor.) You might spot errors more easily if you work, a sentence at a time, from the end back to the beginning.

Some **questions to ask** yourself:

- What do you want the reader to do?
- What are your reader's needs and desires?
- What matching benefits do you offer?
- What features deliver these benefits?
- What differentiates your story?

15

- What evidence supports your story?
- Have you checked your facts?
- What stories/analogies provide colour?
- Are your quotes from credible sources?
- Do your quotes add anything useful?
- Would images help?

Finally, in business writing, try to make yourself invisible so that the reader concentrates on the content of your story and isn't distracted by strange turns of phrase or any desire to show off or impress.

If you feel I can help you further, please email me. I'm **david@tebbo.com** . I look forward to hearing from you