

The Craft of Business Writing

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Merriam-Webster's Dictionary: "Craft: an occupation or trade requiring manual dexterity or artistic skill. From Old English *craft*, meaning strength, skill. Taken from German *kraft*, meaning strength."

The derivation of the word "craft" implies two elements -- labor to develop strength and practice to build skill. In that sense, speaking of the craft of business writing is exact for it takes mental labor to think clearly and practice with writing techniques to build the skill of clear expression. There is mystery in craft only in that some people train themselves to perform better than others. They may have a gift that lends itself to learning more quickly, but they would not be craftsmen without labor and practice to develop the gift.

I grow impatient with writing teachers who spend time defining a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, but ignore comprehension and logic. Over the years, I've told young business writers to tell me what it is they want to write about then to write what they tell me. If they can speak a story or argument clearly, they can learn to coordinate hand and eye to express it in print. If they can't voice the argument, they can't write it no matter how much attention they pay to periods, commas and semicolons.

Thinking leads to writing more than the opposite. One who digests information and summarizes it clearly in a single indicative sentence has taken a major step to write well. From that indicative sentence springs proof of an argument and from proof comes paragraphs and chapters that build the logic step by step, brick by brick into a final structure.

Business writers are neither novelists nor practitioners of the short story, and are rarely tasked with feats of imagination. The business writer's job is to convey information accurately, swiftly and with purpose. From clear, crafted prose comes decisions and from decisions, action. While there is technique in writing a memo or letter or strategic plan, it is skill that can be taught quickly once one has learned to think. This is why classroom instruction focused on writing is often bankrupt. Teachers should first focus on what is happening between the ears.

Before one studies writing, one should master basic logic – deductive and inductive reasoning. Logic, however, in itself is not enough. One must apply it to comprehension. That is, does one understand the data that one is reasoning and writing about? Much failure in business writing arises from lack of understanding, substitution of buzzwords for meaning and obfuscation. One reasons from fog and produces fog rather than light.

Failure to comprehend then to reason stems from a basic failure to educate individuals in the first place. By time a writing teacher at the college level stands before a class, there are already seeds of success or failure embedded in the students. By time a young businessperson with a college degree sits in front of a keyboard, the ability or lack thereof to comprehend and reason will define the words the businessperson writes. Because the craft of business writing begins with logic and comprehension, more time should be spent in schools working on these two skills. It is a pity that it is not.

If one reaches the workforce and is ill-prepared to write, mentors should focus not on word-order but on developing the ability of the businessperson to grasp data and draw correct conclusions. It has been a disappointment to work with colleagues who don't want to know the details of business process but want to apply it or write about it. They are captives of heuristics, rules-of-thumb, without knowing the whys or hows of the formulae. Business to them is an algorithm that can be applied as easily by computer as by human intellect. Hence, they are unprepared – and uninterested – when they confront events that cannot be solved by a rulebook.

Perhaps this is one reason why middle managers have been replaced as the information technology age has developed. There no longer is a need for human intellect to do what computers can do as well, or better. Humans are needed for problems that computers cannot readily comprehend or solve through instruction sets. It is these issues that the human mind best understands, sieves and expresses simply and clearly.

In public relations, practitioners often deal with unknowns because they deal with people whose behaviors are at best illogical and at worst, irrational. Bringing clear and accurate expression to these individuals maximizes chances of piercing self-induced fog with the sunlight of reason. However, practitioners cannot do that unless they themselves are prepared. Too many young practitioners enter the PR business without proper intellectual and logical training. They are victims of teachers and professors who merchandise forms of expression without understanding. This is why I and others like me have a bias against hiring students with degrees in public relations. Yes, they know the proper template for a memo, a letter and a press release, but they don't know what to put into it. They follow rules without understanding.

This is also the reason why the best PR practitioners often come from a background in which they had to digest and understand data then express it – i.e., reporting or from within professions. A news reporter is often captive to the inverted pyramid form of writing, starting with a lead then relaying facts from the most to the least important. The lead is the conclusion buttressed with essential then supplemental information. In other words, the reporter, by virtue of his work, has learned to observe the world, digest elements of it and express those elements with brevity. An engineer or scientist brings a developed understanding

of the topics he writes about but often lacks the translation skills to make points clear to others outside of the profession. This, however, can be more easily rectified than lack of understanding. An editor can train a professional to use simple words and concepts. However, an editor can rarely teach a writer to think.

Well crafted business writing is spare in its use adjectives, adverbs and clauses. It is intended for clarity and concision, for maximum transfer of data in the least amount of time. It has little use for embroidery, other than to support conclusions and recommendations for action. Good business writing depends on evidence and logic for persuasiveness. Marketers with exclamation points and high-flown verbiage need not apply. PR practitioners writing for consumers may engage in exaggerated expression but not when they are writing to senior executives or to business reporters. They are fact people who are offended by hyperbole. They want to see the 5 Ws -- the who, what, where, when, why and how -- and the logic of an event or situation. From that, they want to develop their own conclusions that might or might not agree with arguments a writer is making. However, they want the writer's argument to guide them. The writer's position becomes a spark for discussion leading to a conclusion, often by consensus. The perceptiveness of the writer in developing evidence and logic paves the way to swifter decisions and prompt action.

PR practitioners might consider such writing to be boring, but it needn't be. There is vigor in clear and brief expression. Good business writing is taut and precise. It chooses words carefully and uses them judiciously. It understands the sensitivities of its audience and is marked as much by what it doesn't say as what it does. It is little wonder then that most well crafted business writing is rewriting. One shapes a simple sentence repeatedly until it expresses exactly what one is trying to say, no more and no less. The goal is for the reader to absorb information and to reach the same conclusion that the writer has reached with a minimum of mental reservation. Sentences are so natural in their flow that the reader is swept along and says silently to himself, "Of course." Well crafted business writing demonstrates effortless command of facts and logic. It is not easy to accomplish but writers who achieve it regularly are of value to the organizations in which they work.

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