An illustration of a woman with black skin and hair, wearing a red top and a light-colored skirt, sitting at a desk. She is writing on a piece of paper with a blue pen. To her left is a computer monitor. The background is a simple room with green walls and a grey ceiling. The text "write the" is overlaid in red, lowercase letters across the middle of the image.

write the

BY CAROL L. BROOKS, SR/WA

## TIPS ON HOW TO IMPROVE WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

The phone rang four times before I realized I'd been staring at the computer screen for almost an hour. I've been trying to write a letter to a property owner requesting an easement for a telecommunications electronic cabinet, but all I had in front of me was a blank page. I started to feel anxious – staring at the clock, then at the blank screen, and over to the light that persistently kept blinking on my phone! Why is this happening? I asked myself.

### ***BAM – I hit the wall!***

Many of us excel at our jobs, but when it comes to writing a business letter our thoughts scatter. How can we bring our thoughts into focus, organize them and express them clearly, simply?

This was my dilemma. So, I decided to read “how-to-write” books and learned to write the right way. Here are a few tips to help you improve your written communication.

### **CHECK OUT YOUR WORKSPACE**


Good writing takes concentration. Remember back in high school when teachers encouraged us to do our homework at a place where we could concentrate? This gem of wisdom hasn't necessarily followed most of us to the workplace. How is your workspace? Is it a place where you can write with minimal interruptions – preferably without any?

Interruptions are a sure impasse to concentration. You've no doubt experienced an interruption while you were deep in thought. Then you try to get back to where you left off and –

### ***BAM – You hit the wall!***

To create a workspace that is conducive to writing, try the following:

1. If your workspace is a haven for interruptions, find solitude in a conference room where you can organize your thoughts and create an outline. Then return to your workspace and type a



right way



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preliminary draft of your letter in your computer.

2. If you choose to work in your office, set up your phone to transfer all incoming calls to voicemail. However, be sure to return all calls by the end of the business day.
3. Tidy up your desk or workstation. Sometimes it helps to work in an uncluttered environment.

#### RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION

Complete all research and have it available before you begin writing. With proper research you can present a well-documented letter by including details, such as:

- Owner's name and address
- Maps and associated land records
- Engineer's design
- Size of the cabinet
- Location and size of the easement
- Photocopy of the cabinet with its dimensions
- Zoning regulations

#### WRITE TO YOUR AUDIENCE

Knowing your reader puts a face to your writing. Ask yourself some basic questions to help you get acquainted with your reader:

- Who is my reader?
- What does the reader need to know in order to make a decision?
- How will the reader respond?
  - Will the reader be receptive?
  - Will the reader object?
  - Will the reader be indifferent?

Research information about your reader to help you stay focused on your target audience – a very important focal point, especially when your mind is bogged with everything you want to say to your reader.

#### ORGANIZE YOUR THOUGHTS

Once you begin to think about writing, ideas start coming to mind. Maybe you've even taken some notes. This is a good practice. Jotting down a few notes helps to unclog your mind, allowing you to think about other details of the letter. The following tips can help you organize your ideas:

# THE MORE A MAN WRITES, THE MORE HE CAN WRITE.

–WILLIAM HAZLITT

- WRITE, WRITE, WRITE! Write whatever comes to your mind. Let your thoughts flow. You may not use all of your ideas, but at least you're capturing them.
- Now that your mind has generated thoughts and ideas, organize them into a logical progression. Arrange your letter by answering six basic questions: Who? What? Why? Where? When? How? Information that answers these questions will not only organize your letter, but will also keep your message clear and concise.

## USE A CLEAR AND CONCISE MESSAGE

A letter that is simple, clear and concise accomplishes exactly what the writer intends – RESULTS. The following tips help to create a clear and concise message:

- Understand your message: If the writer doesn't know the message, then how can it be effectively communicated?
- Avoid big words: Use short, simple words: no complex constructions, no jargon and no long words when a short one will do. Using "expenditure" instead of "spending" may make you look smart, but if it confuses the reader, the message is lost. The point is to communicate simply, clearly and effectively. Here are a few big words that are used frequently in business and technical writing.

BIG WORD	SUBSTITUTION
Terminate	End
Incorporate	Include
Substantiate	Prove
Accrue	Add

- Avoid lengthy sentences: Lengthy sentences tire the reader and make your writing hard to read. Generally, a sentence becomes difficult to understand when it exceeds 20 words.
- Be specific: Business people or property owners are interested in the specifics: facts, figures, conclusions and recommendations. Don't be content with saying the electronic cabinet is good – say how good it is. Don't say the fiber optic transmission is fast – say how fast it is. When you're vague, the reader may feel you're withholding information, thereby compromising trust.
- Be simple: The key to success in business writing is to *keep it simple*. Write to express – not to impress. Avoid "corporatese," the brash, overblown style that makes your writing sound impersonal. Avoid using jargon, clichés, and excessive adjectives and buzz words. The following sentences are infested with corporatese:

- *The purpose of this letter is to inform you that ...*
- *Will you please advise me at your earliest convenience of the status of your appraisal report?*
- *Please pushback at me with any questions you may have ...*
- *I'm giving you the heads-up on issues pertaining to ...*

- Be consistent in usage and style:

**Usage:** Good business writers strive for consistency in the use of numbers, units of measure, punctuation, grammar, symbols, capitalization or abbreviations.

**Style:** By definition, the style of a letter is the writer's tone of voice — how the writer comes across to the reader. Is the tone friendly? Forceful? Timid? Your style should be consistent or you'll come across as unprofessional.

- Avoid abbreviations and acronyms on first reference: Many of our readers aren't familiar with the short cuts we use in our industry. For example, a relocation agent describes a great find as SDS in his letter. A property owner wouldn't know that SDS stands for safe, decent and sanitary. When you use abbreviations in your letter, be sure to spell it out on first reference, then use the abbreviation in parentheses on subsequent references as follows: safe, decent and sanitary (SDS). Same rule applies to acronyms as well.

## AVOID DISCRIMINATORY AND SEXIST LANGUAGE

Eliminate discriminatory words from your writing and treat all readers equally. Here are a few more helpful tips:

- Avoid gender-specific terms. Use plural forms to eliminate her and his. For example:

Sexist: The writer should keep his thoughts focused.

Non-sexist: Writers should keep their thoughts focused.

Note: Be sure to make the subject of the sentence plural when the personal pronoun is plural, i.e., Writers should keep their thoughts focused.

- Use neutral titles when gender is unknown. Instead of Dear Sir use Dear Asset Manager or Dear ABC Telecom. Neutralizing sexist language can be tricky because our culture produced a language loaded with masculine words that are often used to refer to either sex. Take the sexist language out of your writing by removing gender reference.

## MOTIVATING YOUR READER

A business letter written in the active voice motivates the reader. In the active voice, action is expressed directly: ABC Telecom will update their telecommunications service. In the passive voice, the



action is indirect: The telecommunications service will be updated by ABC Telecom. When you use the active voice, your writing is direct, vigorous and concise. See for yourself. Count the words in the sentences above – fewer words are in the active voice sentence.

### COMPONENTS OF A BUSINESS LETTER

- **Introduction/Statement of Purpose:** Have you ever read a book that had a slow start in the first paragraph? Did it make the first chapter seem uneventful? Did you even finish the book? The first paragraph sets the tempo for your entire letter. Attract your readers' attention in the first paragraph – even better, in the first sentence! Ask yourself what will catch the readers' attention and persuade them to finish reading your letter.
- **Who, What, Why, Where, When and How:** There are a variety of ways to arrange your letter once you've answered these six basic questions. For the simplest arrangement, answer the "why" and the "what" in the first paragraph. Then delve into the background/explanation by answering the remaining questions in the body of your letter.
- **Call for Action/Response:** Call for action and/or request a response. If you have a deadline for the response, specify a date.
- **Closing:** Try to omit the closing entirely. Doing so will reinforce the impact of your message. For example:

*Please let me know your response to this proposal by May 1.*

*Sincerely,*

*M. C. Hargrove*

*Right of Way Agent*

### WRITE YOUR FIRST DRAFT

Using your outline, notes, written passages and research

information, give in to the act of writing. Let yourself go! Don't break your flow! When we are in the act of writing, we work the right hemisphere of our brain. When we are in the act of writing, we allow our brain to perform at this optimum. <sup>1</sup>

The functions of the right hemisphere are imaginative, innovative and humorous. It inspires your writing, provides sensory images, flashes of insight and sentences that flow in natural, rhythmic patterns that have a quality of personal style.

The left hemisphere performs the "editor" function of the brain. It has to stop and think about what you're writing – checking grammar, punctuation, spelling, etc. If the editor is in control while you're writing, it will likely make you stop and worry about whether you're doing it right. The left side is typically more dominant than the right. If allowed, the left side will take over the functions best performed by the right hemisphere. Let the right side of your brain do what it does best. So, write, write, write. You'll put your editor to work, just not during your first draft.

### EDIT: POLISH YOUR WRITING

Now is the time for your editor to work!

Copyediting doesn't involve a spell check or a grammar check. Editing is proofreading. <sup>2</sup> Sometimes reading what you've written out loud turns on a light. Listen for stilted words, remoteness or obscurity. You want your communication to sound conversational, a face-to-face conversation rather than a speech. That means, looking for any hint of being condescending to your reader. While you edit, keep the following in mind:

- Is your message clear, simple and brief?
- Is your communication reader-friendly? Have you come across too technical for your reader?



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The following is an example of an edited letter:

Date

Your Name

Your Address

Your Phone Number

Company Name

Company Address

**RE: UPDATE OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS EQUIPMENT**

To Whom It May Concern,

~~The purpose of this letter is to inform you that~~ ABC Telecom will be updating their telecommunications equipment serving the Albany area in the coming months. This updating will ~~provide for better~~ improve the quality of transmission and future growth service. ~~Improvement of our existing facilities~~ These improvements require placing ~~state-of-the-art~~ fiber optic cable and their associated an equipment cabinet. ~~One of the state-of-art cabinets is to be located as proposed~~ A diagram of the cabinet is shown on the enclosed drawing.

In order ~~for this equipment to be placed to~~ proceed with our plan, we must have your concurrence agreement in the form of a Grant of Easement. I have marked a tax assessor's map with the approximate location of where an easement would be required for the cabinet.

The easement area ~~we are requesting~~ is 6'x15'. ~~The easement size includes~~ It covers the cabinet and access space ~~to the cabinet~~ for our technicians. The cabinet is a pad-mounted unit, which is 66 inches high, 78 inches wide and 30 inches deep. ~~An artist's rendering is shown on the enclosed drawing.~~

~~I would appreciate your contacting~~ Please call me at your earliest convenience to discuss ~~the proposed work to be done~~ our plans to upgrade your service. ~~Please call me~~ I can be reached at (111) 222-3333. ~~at your earliest convenience.~~

Sincerely,

Carol Brooks

Right of Way Agent

If you have the time, keep your letter and mail it the next day. Let it simmer overnight. Edit it again on the next day. You've heard the saying "what a difference a day makes." You'll be surprised how this simple concept, when applied to editing, provides a fresh look to your writing.

The final step in the editing process is to check the layout of your letter, or what I refer to as *body language*. Click the Print Preview on your computer and check for spacing and alignment. Is your letter evenly spaced and centered on the page? Checking the margins is the best way to determine if your letter is centered. Is there enough white space on the paper, so as not to overwhelm the reader? Not enough white space can make the reader feel cramped, choked.

Writing is an art. It takes practice to master an art. Thus, the more you write, the better you'll become. Reading is another important part of writing. It helps to inspire the writer. Yes! It even inspires writing business letters. Keep a file of letters that you can read before writing. See how helpful they are.

***BAM – Now you can kick down that wall! ❖***

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