



Supervisor NEWSLETTER

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Mastering the Art of Professional Workplace Writing

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“Written language is the single most important and far-reaching technology available to humans and has served as the foundation for virtually all other information technologies...”

Given the power of the written word—to start wars, sell products, or convey someone’s deepest feelings on his or her wedding day—it can be hard to know how to use. Even for people who write for a living, it’s often challenging to begin, continue, and end. Advertisers have it down to a science, but for the rest of us it’s an art that is often elusive.

As a supervisor, your job likely requires you to write in some capacity: reports, email correspondence, departmental plans and processes, performance reviews, disciplinary incidents, announcements, complaint resolution responses, and other business-related communications. It may be a skill you pride yourself in, or it could make you freeze in front of your computer as you wonder where to start. Here are some technical writing strategies that can help guide you in the process with whatever you need to write:

Know Your Audience

Expectations, tone, and content will differ depending on the audience. Stand in your readers’ shoes and imagine how they might interpret your words. What would they want to know? How could you best convey it? Speak to

your readers from this perspective and your words will have more influence. For example, if you’re advising staff about an upcoming change, think of concerns they may raise and mention them in your announcement. This shows that you can see from their perspective and understand the effect the change may have on them. Though the change may be set in stone, your thoughtful delivery can help your staff receive the news with less friction.

Know Your Point

Develop a short sentence that states the crux of your message, and say it up front. A common writer’s tool is to 1) state the points you’re going to make, 2) make your points, and 3) summarize the points you’ve made. It also helps to recognize your underlying goal—is it to inspire, convince, or inform? Keeping your goal in mind will help you craft the most persuasive language for your purpose.

Great leaders have to successfully focus on and cultivate both appreciation and recognition. And all of us benefit from understanding this distinction in business (and in life). Recognition is appropriate and necessary when it’s earned and deserved. Appreciation, however, is important all the time.

Shorter is Better

“I would have written a shorter letter, but I did not have the time.” – Mark Twain

It can actually be challenging to be brief and get your message across. Often, people continue to write and hope their point emerges as they chase it on the page with more words! Take the pressure off yourself to “do it right” the first time. Write a rough draft and then edit your work to sharpen your meaning and fine-tune sentences—it’s what the professionals do. Read what you’ve written

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aloud. This trick will ensure your writing makes sense to you and has the tone and message you intend. Resist the impulse to say more.

"The secret of being boring is to say everything." – Voltaire

Know the Limits

Communication methods have their limits. Some messages are best delivered in person, such as constructive criticism. In this situation, body language, eye contact, and emotions are vital, so an email could easily lead to misunderstandings. Letters tend to be more formal than emails, so choose this style if your message is declarative—job promotions, performance improvement plans, and important announcements.

Be Aware of Tone

Is this a familiar and casual connection, first time correspondence, or person in a position of power? Drive your words in the right direction—casual, collegial, or formal. Rely on a second set of eyes. Ask someone who you know will be honest to review your writing, especially if there could be an emotional component to what you're saying. Have him/her read it for a "snark check." If it's snarky, wait to send it until you can read it with calmer eyes and revise it.

Match your Audience

Do you write paragraphs and receive a sentence in response? While it can be helpful to write an in-depth answer, it can be most effective to match the style of the person writing you. If he/she/they communicate in short phrases, write your response in bullet points or list form rather than wordy paragraphs. Conversely, if the person you're communicating with sends you in-depth missives, they will likely appreciate a thoughtful detailed response.

No Jargon

Nothing can bore a reader more than a minefield of acronyms and industry terms. Unless your work is highly technical and your reader shares a vocabulary of jargon, use common words and spell out acronyms.

Be Inclusive

Do your best to use multiple pronouns to include all people.

Grammar and Spelling

Make a good impression by using Spell Check and correct grammar. Sometimes, intelligent people can lose credibility quickly with a hasty email littered with spelling and grammatical errors. Mistakes are distracting and they can lead to judgements about carelessness, intelligence, or poor communication skills. Focus your readers on your message, not inadvertent errors.

Finally, look out for these common email mishaps:

- Not using a greeting or closing sentence
- Being too informal
- Neglecting to change the subject line
- Using "reply all"
- Including too many personal details
- Asking questions that have already been answered

With a little forethought and some editing your writing can be clear and effective. Start by considering your audience. Next, clarify your point, decide your communication method, use inclusive language, and then edit your work for tone, spelling, and grammar. With practice, writing this way will become second nature and your written relationships will be stronger for it.

References:

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