



10 Tips for Superior B2B Writing

Know the Rules and Selectively Ignore Them

By Jean Van Rensselar

If you're like most busy executives, you've got a stack of reading material in your office and more online that you plan to get to someday. If you look at what's actually in that stack, it's a collection of material that you thought was important enough to save, but too lengthy to read on the spot.

The goal for B2B writing is to make it on-the-spot reading wherever possible—you want to avoid the stack. You do that by creating a visual impression that the material is well organized and to the point and then you deliver on that by making the copy easy to understand and informative. Following are 10 ways to help you do that.

1. **Be Concise**: You are writing for upper level executives that don't have much time. Your communication, then, needs to be to the point and clear. The reader should get the message early on that the document will be enjoyable, rather than just another obligation. Say what you need to say in as few words as possible. The goal is to condense everything to one page while still allowing for ample white space. This isn't as difficult as it seems—it just takes practice.
2. **Pay Attention to the Layout**: This means no more than 4 sentences or 100 words in a paragraph. Use numbers and bullets liberally and keep things easy on the eyes---avoid all caps and italics. Use a font that's easy to read. Not everyone has perfect vision; people that wear glasses don't always have them when they need them. Safe fonts include Arial 10 pt. and Times New Roman 12 pt. There are other good choices, but it's wise to compare your choice with the same text in Arial or Times to be sure it's just as easy to read.
3. **Punctuate Beautifully**. Punctuation is an art, not a science. If it's done well, the reader will only notice that the document reads seamlessly. Think of punctuation as a representation of the natural stops and starts in a conversation. A comma is a short pause, a semicolon is longer; a colon still longer: and a period the longest. If you know how to punctuate well, you don't need to follow the new short choppy sentence rule.

4. Create Logical Progression. Before you start writing, decide what you want the document to accomplish. Don't repeat the same point twice and don't backtrack. No matter what your point, the communication should continue in a clear direction and conclude with a concise summary.
5. Use Clichés and Passive Sentences Judiciously. Yes, it is OK to use (but not overuse) them. Sometimes clichés are the most succinct way to get a thought across. Keep in mind, though, that readers without a perfect command of English may not understand. Also, sometimes passive sentences are the best way to put the most important information first and create emphasis.
6. Aim for Unmodified Nouns and Verbs. Instead of relying on adjectives and adverbs choose nouns and verbs that are precise alone. For example, instead of "read carefully" use "examine".
7. Be Specific. Specific facts, figures, and references are much more compelling than superlatives like great, nearly all, and leading.
8. Expand Your Reader's Vocabulary. If you have a great vocabulary, use it. Include a word or 2 that the reader may not be familiar with, but be sure to define it in the context. For example, "For many professionals, the language of technology is obtuse, but it doesn't have to be that difficult to understand." People like to learn new words and this is exactly how they learn them.
9. Finish the Document as Early as You Can: You want to set it aside for as long as you can before making final corrections. There are two good ways to proof a document efficiently. The best way is to set it aside for at least several hours (the amount of time expands in proportion to the length of the document). If you don't have time, then someone else needs to proof it. The bottom line is that the person proofing needs to have fresh eyes.
10. Don't Confuse Creative with Messy: Creative writing style is not an excuse for undisciplined, unprofessional writing. The adage goes: When you know the rules, you can break the rules. Sending out a document full of grammar, spelling, and syntax errors sends the same message to the reader as a salesperson that shows up for a meeting in stained wrinkly clothes. The only difference is that if your document is published online, it will be there forever.

About the Author

Jean Van Rensselaar is the owner of Chicago-based Smart PR Communications, which specializes in public relations and communications strategy, creation, and implementation for small and mid-sized technical-oriented companies. You can reach her at Jean@SmartPRCommunications.com or 630-363-8081.