



Effective Writing — What, When, and How to Say It Electronically

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Agenda

- Introduction
- Writing Effective Email
 - Introduction
 - Example
 - Tips
- Selected Principles of Good Writing
- More Effective Email
- Closing Thoughts

Introduction

- The ability to write well is critical to your professional success
- Good writing gets noticed and will help you stand out from the crowd
 - So does bad writing, but probably not in the way you would like
- Good writing is a skill that can be learned and developed

Introduction (cont.)

- The four steps to any writing
 - Idea generation
 - Organization
 - Writing (Flow)
 - Review and editing

Introduction (cont.)

- The four steps to any writing
 - Idea generation
 - Organization
 - **Writing (Flow)**
 - **Review and editing**

Poll question #1

The benefits of learning and maintaining effective writing skills include:

- Writing well is critical to your success in any career
- Clear communication avoids confusion and related problems
- Good writing gets noticed
- All of the above
- None of the above

Writing effective email - Introduction

- Email is one of the biggest challenges facing most organizations today
 - We get too much of it
 - We can't keep up with it
 - But we can't stop doing it
- Email is not the issue; how we approach using it is
- Good writing can significantly help the email problem and allow you to shine

Writing effective email – Introduction (cont.)

- Know who your audience is and write to your audience
- Determine your purpose
- Think about what you want to say
- Organize your document
- Write using the selected principles of good writing
- Review

Example – “Before”

From: dwight@dundermifflin.com

To: jim@dundermifflin.com

Subject: question re: comp set rebuttal

Some first blush thoughts. Generally, we would do the r&d to sales cut off a 3% of sales. However, sometimes lower. 1. Ck w/ Michael and see what he has that can be used to show that 5% is too high because such a ratio is associated with higher returns. 2. check the correlation of OM to R&D/sales > see if there is a correlation between higher R&D to sales and a higher OM 3. In the discussion regarding comparability of comps to tested party, you can emphasize that is a substantial functional difference (in addition to the vertical integration of the comps). 4. point out that the IRS has shown nothing to suggest that 5% is a reasonable screening criteria, then show what happens to the IRS set if you apply a 3% of sales limitation.

Example – “After”

From: dwight@dundermifflin.com

To: jim@dundermifflin.com

Subject: Review of IRS Write-up

I have reviewed the IRS write-up and here are my initial thoughts. The IRS compares us to companies with an R&D to sales ratio of up to 5%. We do not engage in R&D activities. Therefore, an appropriate R&D to sales ratio cut off point is 3%.

We need to confirm with Michael that:

- (1) 5% is too high based on our facts, and;
- (2) Companies with a 5% R&D to sales ratio generally enjoy a higher operating margin.

Writing effective email – Tips

1. Keep your reader in mind
2. Prefer clear, familiar words
 - Don't use a large word when a small word will do
 - Select specific nouns and action words for verbs
3. Keep sentences and messages short and simple
4. Use a professional and courteous tone
5. Write carefully and proofread
 - Write email with the same care as other writing
 - Re-read all messages before you hit 'send'

Writing effective email – Tips (cont.)

- What are you asking for?
- Four common email actions
 - Action
 - The recipient takes physical action
 - Respond
 - The recipient needs only to respond
 - Read
 - The recipient needs to only read the information
 - FYI Only
 - The recipient needs to file the information for future reference. There is no need to take action, read, or respond.

Writing effective email – Tips (cont.)

- Use good subject lines
 - Identify the action required
 - Use EOM (end of message) if a message fits wholly within the subject line
 - Consider using a subject line numbering system to establish priority
- Subject line prioritization system
 - Sample codes
 - 1 = TODAY
 - 2 = 24 HRS
 - 3 = 72 HRS
 - 4 = THIS WK/NEXT WK
 - 5 = FYI

Selected principles of good writing – Create power paragraphs

- Start each paragraph with a topic sentence (your conclusion or request)
- Include the related information in the body of your paragraph
 - Can the reader follow easily your request or analysis?
 - Does it make sense to them?
- End the paragraph with a concluding sentence that matches with your topic sentence
- Use transitions to connect ideas from one sentence to the next, from one paragraph to the next
- Use more, rather than fewer paragraphs
 - This structure makes the document easier to read and clearly separates ideas
- Use visual indicators, like numbering or headlines, where helpful

Selected principles – Write in the active voice

- Use of the active voice animates your style
 - Example
 - Active: The taxpayer elected to...
 - Passive: An election was made by the taxpayer to...
- *Limited exception* – When you don't want to take or assign culpability or blame, especially that of a client
 - Examples:
 - Active: The client made several mistakes.
 - Passive: Mistakes were made.
 - Active: The taxpayer failed to timely file its S corporation election.
 - Passive: No S corporation election was timely filed.

Selected principles – Avoid legalese

- Write like you talk
 - Don't use archaic words like hereinafter, heretofore, and wherefore
 - Other examples
 - Enclosed please find...
 - Pursuant to our conversation...
 - Most people do not use these phrases in normal conversation; do not use them when you write

Selected principles – Avoid common mistakes

- Match verb number and tense
- Use plural verbs with compound subjects
 - The Fourth Circuit and, more recently, the Seventh Circuit were overruled.
 - Not, “was overruled.”
- The trouble with “myself”
 - Please call John or me.
 - Not, “Please call John or myself.”

Selected principles – Mind your *thats* and *whiches*

- Restrictive clauses are essential to the grammatical and logical completeness of a sentence and, therefore, take ‘that’
- If you can omit the clause without changing the meaning of the sentence, it is non-restrictive and therefore takes ‘, which’
 - Note, ‘which’ is usually set off with a comma (because it could be excluded from the sentence)
- Examples:
 - The cows that are in the barn are OK.
 - i.e., Only the cows in the barn are OK. We don’t know about the other cows.
 - The cows, which are in the barn, are OK.
 - i.e., The cows are OK, presumably all of them. They happen to be located in the barn.

Selected principles – Use proper punctuation

- **Apostrophe:** Denotes possession, not plurals
 - Charles's, the IRS's; not, Charles' or IRS'
 - Distinguish the schools in the NCAA (plural) from the school's (possessive) colors
- **Commas:** Use the serial comma (your company can afford the ink and can benefit from the clarity)
 - Red, white, and blue
 - Not, “red, white and blue”
- **Parentheses:** Punctuation is outside the last parenthesis
 - (like this).
 - Not, (like this.)

Selected principles - Review your writing

- Actually read your work (and correct any errors you spot)
- Run spell check

Poll question #2

Which of the following is NOT a principle of good writing?

- Passive voice should be avoided in all situations
- Each paragraph in a memo should start with a topic sentence
- Correct grammar is as important as clear writing
- Avoid legalese; write like you talk
- All of the above
- None of the above

More effective email – Reducing email volume

- Send less email
- Write clear emails so that they don't come back with questions
- Include all necessary attachments so you don't get additional emails asking for necessary information or documents
- Use CC line only when it impacts the recipients' objectives
- Resist getting involved in email threads that don't impact your objectives

More effective email – Confidentiality

- Beware!
 - Confidentiality is not guaranteed with email
 - Personal messages can be monitored

More effective email – Etiquette

- Assume all messages are permanent
- Brief messages are considerate of the reader
- Don't use email as a way to avoid personal contact
- Greetings make messages more personal
- Use your signature
- The subject line can be used as an overview
- And no:
 - Flaming (sending messages with offensive remarks)
 - Shouting (ALL CAPS!)
 - Mumbling (all small letters; little or no punctuation)
 - Using **URGENT** excessively

Poll question #3

The goal of email is to:

- Avoid personal contact (i.e., phone calls or live meetings)
- Transmit concise messages to a targeted audience
- Eliminate permanency; emails are “virtual” only
- Quickly deliver messages to large audiences using the CC function
- All of the above
- None of the above

Closing thoughts

- Writing well will help you stand out from the crowd
- You can learn to write well, but it usually takes dedication
- Readers are impatient to get the goods; Don't make them work any harder than necessary
- If you wouldn't say it, don't write it
- Consider reading a book or a substantive article on writing every month or two
- Finally, in the words of Mark Twain in a letter to a friend:

I apologize for the length of this letter, but if I had had more time I would have written you a shorter one.

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