



anglo-corporate: briefing

ideas to help trade associations and societies communicate effectively

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EASILY ELIMINATE FIVE BAD BUSINESS-WRITING HABITS IN 2016

IT'S EASIER THAN YOU THINK

You might have been thinking in the early part of this year about how you could tool-up to be better at what you do. What you write, and how you write it, are big drivers of the way you are perceived and whether your message gets noticed. Your working life might be awash with improvement initiatives but you can quickly add something to your writing skills by reading the five ideas below and keeping them in mind as you write.

1. VARY SENTENCE LENGTHS

Monotony is a close cousin of boredom. So, put in a bit of work to add variety in your sentences. There's nothing wrong with having a longish sentence (like this one) once in a while, especially when you need to get complicated information across to your readers, though I can almost guarantee that there will be opportunities for variety. How? It's quite easy. Just vary the lengths of the sentences you write. Instead of bog-standard business sentences, imagine that you're having a conversation with your reader. When you hold a conversation, you probably vary your sentence lengths without even thinking about it.

2. WATCH THE PRONOUNS

Don't overdo the use of "I" in business documents: it turns people off. On the other hand make a mental note to use plenty of "you", "your" and "we". In sales training, this might be called building rapport. We know intuitively that we feel more comfortable with someone who speaks to us directly (the "you") and with whom we feel you have something in common (the "we").

3. AXE APOSTROPHE ANXIETY

Many of us grew up with the idea that, in formal business writing, we should never use contractions in general, and apostrophes in particular. When I wrote public facing materials for a living, I had to work hard to keep documents readable, rather than formal. My advice would be to relax, think about your audience and the right tone for your document. "It's not house building companies who can't deliver; it's the planning system" works fine in a hard hitting short report about a lack of affordable homes in the UK, while "It isn't our responsibility to pay for the redelivery of goods, if you're not in a position to receive them" is out of place in a set of general terms and conditions on retailer's website.

4. AVOID THE PASSIVE VOICE

An old chestnut of style advice, I know, but it's surprising how ubiquitous the passive voice is, despite sustained efforts to eradicate it over the years. What do we mean by passive voice? Here we're talking about "it has been decided by the committee" type-language, in place of "the committee decided". Of course, using the passive voice may be unavoidable at times (see what I mean?), and that's fine, but wherever you can, eliminate using it. Your copy will sound much more powerful. The usual culprit is a variation of "be", so keep an eye (or ear) out for words like "is", "was", "are" and "were". If you think this might be a weak spot for you, apply this routine as you write: catch yourself at it; stop; ask who is doing the action; and rewrite the sentence starting with that person or entity. So, in a memo to the board, don't write "in the future, it may be worthwhile to consider...", but "the board may wish to consider..."

5. COSH YOUR CLICHÉS

What's a cliché? Simply put, any turn of phrase that's overused. What constitutes a cliché is really a matter of judgement. Some are obvious to spot. In that board memo I mentioned in 4, we'd all know not to write: "frankly, with our shareholders, at the end of the day, it's not rocket science". However, some turns of phrase that were original, or arresting at first become hackneyed over time as a result of over use. Eye-watering, perfect storm and in his/her DNA, are some examples of evocative words that (in my opinion) are now somewhat overused. With a small amount of effort, you can make your work more original. When you're about to use a phrase that you think has quite wide currency, why not stop for a few seconds and try to think of an equally striking but original alternative. Why not try: "Ambition was just hardwired into her", rather than "Ambition was in her DNA."



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