



# 20 tips to increase writing skills

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## Introduction

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Every time I conduct a course on an aspect of writing, attendees always ask if there are some quick tips I can give them to increase their skills.

When I was delivering a course on how to design and implement an in-house Style Manual, attendees still asked the same question.

Recently, I was working with fifteen engineers, and you guessed it, they wanted to know how to increase their writing skills, how to write faster and how to make their reports more user-friendly.

Everyone without exception said they wanted information quickly. They didn't want to attend a course that could take several hours or worse weeks to complete. They wanted a book they could refer to whenever the need arose... a book they could read quickly that got right down to the subject without any of the "padding" and "fluff".

Well, I've taken the hint and written *20 Tips to Increase Writing Skills*. How to write faster and how to make reports more user-friendly are covered in another book in the 20 Tips Series.

Some of the 20 Tips in this book are so simple they are overlooked; yet they can add vigour to your writing, make your material more readable, and importantly, save time.

Let's get started.

## Tip 1

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### Communication

When you write you are communicating with the person who is reading the letter, article, report, manual or whatever you are writing at the time.

You don't have the privilege of seeing the person face-to-face. They cannot see your gestures or hear your tone of voice.

If you're face-to-face with someone and you say something that is ambiguous, has double meanings or can easily be misunderstood, the person will be led by your tone of voice and how you deliver your message.

But when a person receives written material, all you have to work with are the words.

So the words have to say everything.

The material is being read for a reason. The person may be gathering information, looking for directions, interested in investing in your organisation or simply reading for pleasure.

Importantly, you may be writing to motivate the reader, increase their enthusiasm, or encourage them to take some sort of action once they have read your words.

Your document must communicate straight away, right from the very first word; otherwise the reader will not invest the time and may even choose to read something else.

You need to build rapport with readers, especially if it is your job to provide solutions to their problems. One of the quickest ways to alienate readers is to write with a wordy, overly formal style. Often, they see this as too difficult and may not understand your message.

If your writing fits the above description, you have not provided a solution; you have created a problem.

Ideally, your writing should have a user-friendly style suitable for the type of document you're writing and, of course, it must be factually correct.

Getting the "tone" or the sound of your document right will make all the difference to the way your material is accepted.

If you're overbearing, dictatorial or talking down to your audience you won't win their trust and they may not believe what you're saying. You need to endear the reader to you, win them over and build that rapport.

Most people like to be entertained when they invest the time to read something, especially if the subject is "dry" and could easily be boring. Using humour and a light-hearted approach, if the subject will support it, is often acceptable. But, whatever the document, it should always be user-friendly, even a technical manual.

Just because it's technical doesn't mean it shouldn't also be readable.

## Giving Instructions

The majority of people read instructions every day. It might only be how many headache pills to take, or how to change a printer cartridge, but they are still instructions.

So instructions are the most common form of communication.

They should be concise, in the right sequence and complete, otherwise the reader could take the wrong number of pills, or open the package upside down and the cartridge drops out and breaks.

Now that sounds logical, but how many instructions have you read and had to re-read more than once to make sure you knew what to do.

The worst example of instructions is when they're translated from another language into English and not edited to make sure they're correct.

Here is an example of instructions on how to fit a night latch.

### Range

The locks are suitable for various kind of wooden doors. For door of 3555mm (The thicknees with a piece of wood when the door is too thin).

### Operation

From inside the latch bolt is operated by stick pull from outside will be used with the key end for protection against prying. Turn saretybolt reach insides deed from outside willn to be used with the key.

#### Direction

Choose a droper temotate according to the opening direction of the door opening left wards or right wards and past it on the door properly. Bore a 30mm hole through the door at the point marked on template put the cylinder into the cylinder ring then insert it into the door with the mark being up wards. Etc.

#### Maintenance

Keep clean in the cylinder groove don't into rubbish and sundries and it ism't add oll but it is add pencil powder key is smoothly: After a time please uncover cap add a titter grease. The lock can prolong life time.

I won't go on, I'm sure you get the idea. If only these instructions had been edited before they were included with the locks. It makes you wonder how many people telephoned the company and asked for instructions they could actually use.

One of my students mentioned he had bought a flat pack containing a piece of furniture and the instructions to put it together were even worse than those given above.

Doesn't say much for the professionalism of the company selling the products.

### Providing Solutions

Communication may also need to provide solutions, in which case the message should be efficient, using the least number of words as possible. These words need to be effective and chosen carefully.

If the communication fails, for whatever reason, you will not be providing a solution; you will be creating a problem.

Your job, as the writer, is to focus on what the reader needs to know, why they need to know it, what the solution will do for them and whether it answers all their questions or concerns.

Imagine what would happen if you sent a direct mail letter to a membership of 30,000 people and your message wasn't clear and five per cent of the circulation decided to telephone your office at the same time to clarify what they had to do. Fifteen hundred people all making a telephone call at the same time would certainly throw your telephone system into chaos.

Say your membership was 175,000 people and 25 per cent or 43,750 who telephoned were dissatisfied with your message. Your call centre would certainly be working overtime.

Was your communication clear and easy to understand? – I don't think so.

Communication needs to... communicate.

In Tip Six we discuss writing for the audience and why you should take them into consideration.

### Being Consistent

Communication should also be consistent. If it isn't people become confused, especially if they receive quite a lot of information from you or your company.

Although this sounds like your communication will be predictable, it does mean it will be acceptable and understandable, and that should be your aim.

I was asked to deliver a training session to a group of people who dealt with customer enquires and had to respond in writing. The company gave me the automatic response letters to assess before I delivered the training. I was alarmed at the inconsistency between the departments.

For example, Department A's response:

Dear Member

It is important to note that at all times you are required to keep the Board up to date with any change of details including marital status, address and the change in the number of dependants.

Department B's response:

Dear Mr Mrs or Ms (whichever is appropriate)

If your details change for any reason, perhaps a change in marital status, address or the number of dependants, please notify us immediately so we can update our records. Proof may be required.

Both of these responses came from the same organisation, but they are distinctly different. Department A was involved in life insurance and Department B in household insurance.

In many instances the response was not focused on the customer, it was impolite and in some cases quite rude, for example:

We refer you to clause 9.2.1. (b) of the Superannuation Act wherein it states that the dependents of the insured person are unable to, unless otherwise stated or conclusions have been directed by a court of law, withdraw any of the preserved funds before the retirement date, or, in the case of death, until after twenty one days have elapsed after burial. Proof of retirement and/or death is required by the department before any due process...

This letter was in response to a simple enquiry about when a member could access their superannuation funds.

I'm sure this written response would produce a "please explain" telephone call.

Inconsistency between departments lets your customers/clients know that departments don't talk to each other, and the company doesn't have an overall policy for communication.

### Creating a Style Sheet/Manual

Creating a Style Sheet/Manual for your company is an effective way of ensuring your written material will be consistent.

It simply contains standard usage, for example:

%	Should be written as per cent
1 – 10	Always express in full, for example, one to ten
20 – upwards	Use numbers, for example, 25, 51

A Style Sheet/Manual covers anything from the above three items to using capitals for names, to page layouts, footnotes and headers.

Imagine if a reader received a letter stating your commission rates have increase from 2% to five per cent. If you are not consistent with the way you write numbers and percentages, what makes the reader think you will be consistent with the way you handle their account.

Even if there is only one person in your office, a Style Manual could still ensure all your customers/clients receive the same standard of communication.

Once it has been set up it can be added to whenever the need arises.

Templates for standard responses can also be generated from your Style Sheet/Manual.