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Professional Email Writing

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The most important aspect of any business communication is clarity. Whether the goal is to provide information, ask a question or make a request, it is essential that your audience understand you clearly and easily. The clearer your message is, the easier it is for your reader to do what you want them to do. Here are a few easy ways to make your business emails more reader-friendly.

WRITE SIMPLY: STRIVE TO BE UNDERSTOOD RATHER THAN TO IMPRESS

In an effort to sound more “professional,” some actuaries fall into the trap of using overly formal language that obscures their message. No, changing every instance of “use” to “utilize” isn’t fooling anyone! Similarly, using pompous language like “thus” or “pursuant to your request” will only distance yourself from your reader and slow them down. Avoid words that sound like they belong in a legal contract.

Rather than trying to impress your reader with fancy words, focus on making it as easy as possible for your reader to understand your message. If you wouldn’t say it in person, it

probably doesn’t belong in an email either. Your writing will be more easily understood with simple, conversational language.

“I love words but I don’t like strange ones. You don’t understand them, and they don’t understand you. Old words is like old friends—you know ’em the minute you see ’em.”

—Will Rogers

GET TO THE POINT

It might seem logical to organize your message chronologically: providing background upfront, describing the current status of your issue, and ending with your request and next steps. However, your message will be clearer if you structure it with the reader in mind and lead with your main point.

1. Begin with the **purpose of the note**. What are you asking the reader to do? This will help the reader know what to focus on in the rest of your email. Everything else in your note should tie back to this message.
2. Next, include **relevant background information**. Since you’ve already told the reader what they need to do with this note, they’ll

have the context to process this information more effectively.

3. End the note by expanding on your message and clearly defining **next steps and deadlines**.

“If you have an important point to make, don’t try to be subtle or clever. Use a pile driver. Hit the point once. Then come back and hit it again. Then hit it a third time—a tremendous whack.”

—Winston Churchill

WRITE CONCISELY

If you find yourself wishing there was a formula for effective writing, you’re not alone! In an effort to simplify technical manuals in the 1970s, the U.S. Navy hired Ph.D. researchers who developed the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Formula.² The U.S. Department of Defense still uses this formula today to measure readability and set standards for technical documents. The Grade Level estimates the number of years of U.S. education required to understand the document. As a general rule, business emails shouldn’t exceed the 10–12 range.

$$0.39 * \left(\frac{\text{total words}}{\text{total sentences}} \right) + 11.8 * \left(\frac{\text{total syllables}}{\text{total words}} \right) - 15.59$$

This formula suggests that you can make your writing more readable by reducing the words per sentence or reducing the syllables per word. This may seem obvious, but in practice this means constantly looking for opportunities to break long sentences into separate thoughts or to replace “fancy” words with simpler ones. Although these aren’t the only factors that matter, they are two key ways to improve your writing’s readability.

“The most valuable of all talents is that of never using two words when one will do.”

—Thomas Jefferson

ENDNOTES

¹ Although “utilize” is commonly used interchangeably as a synonym of “use,” it is often used incorrectly. “Utilize” suggests a new use for something other than its intended purpose. For example, a pricing model may be *used* or *utilized* for some ad hoc analysis, but a pricing model can only be *used* but *not utilized* for pricing. Ironically, writing “utilize” incorrectly in an attempt to show off an impressive vocabulary can demonstrate the opposite!

² Microsoft Word automatically calculates the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level at the end of a spelling and grammar check if the following option is enabled: [Word Options]>[Proofing]>[Show readability statistics].



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