



'TUSCS' / Five Easy Ways to Write Brilliantly in the Workplace

INTRODUCTION

Raise your hand if you've ever read anything that was poorly written. A billboard? A letter? A proposal? Have you ever spotted a spelling or grammar mistake on the back of a bus or a van? Something along the lines of 'How's my *diving*'?

The reality is that much of what we read everyday is bad. And...largely forgettable as a result.

Welcome to the Communication Abyss, in which we're confronted by approximately three and a half thousand commercial messages a day, and we judge people and companies within a matter of seconds – based on how well or how poorly they communicate.

I'm Tiffany Markman. I'm a freelance writer, editor and trainer, and I focus heavily on developing the crucial talent that is flawless corporate writing.

I work for clients including BMW, Coca-Cola, Absa, Standard Bank, Rand Merchant Bank, Sun International and Vodacom, as well as many smaller clients and start-up businesses – and if I've learned anything in the last nine years, it's that you don't have long to 'sell' readers your message.

On a website, for example, research shows that you have fifteen seconds to communicate with readers before they leave your site, and three clicks to give them what they're looking for. In print, it's about twenty seconds – which translates into only two paragraphs.

This talk and the Q&A session at the end are dedicated to sharing my secrets; to giving you 'Five Easy Ways to Write Brilliantly in the Workplace'. In light of our closeness to the origins of humankind and to various woolly mammoths, I've summarised my secrets into the acronym 'TUSCS', which stands for:

Target. Know who you're writing to.
Unify. Monkeys can only peel one banana at a time.
Simplify. Write simply, positively and actively.
Clarify. Keep it short and tight.
Specify. If you don't ask...yes...you don't get!



Let's start with Target, or Secret 1.

1. TARGET BY 'KNOWING WHO YOU'RE WRITING TO'

The playwright, George Bernard Shaw, once asked a London socialite if she'd sleep with him for a million pounds. She responded with an enthusiastic 'Yes!' But when Shaw playfully lowered his offer to one pound, she was insulted. 'What do you think I am?' she asked. And Shaw smiled and said, 'Madam, we know what you are. Now we're just negotiating.'

The moral of this story is: when putting pen to paper or finger to keyboard, stop for a moment and ask yourself: 'Do I know who I'm engaging with?'

Think about your reader as a real person. Visualise him or her sitting in front of you and then use the same words and expressions you'd use in person. Say, '*This* is the person I'm writing to!'

Let me give you an example. I had to write a press release recently, about an upcoming promotion. An exceptional one. Something really different. And this is the thought process I used to define my average reader:

"She's a features editor, between the ages of 25 and 39, with at least one tertiary qualification. She's probably heard of the company, but she may not know the details. And she's likely to be indifferent to this event at first, because she's covered loads of promotions in her publication in the past. It might be good to use a harder sell, or perhaps a racier tone, to engage her. I think I'll stick to simple language and short sentences, so she can read through it quickly, make a decision and get on with her life."

Clearly, there are some specific questions to ask yourself when defining your readers. These are:

1. Can I describe my readers?
2. What's their position in the company or in general?
3. What's their background?
4. How much do they already know about my topic?
5. Can I guess what their feelings toward my document will be?
6. Have I used language they'll easily understand?
7. Is the tone of my document in line with my readers?

Once you have a basic picture of your readers, you can determine the ideal tone in which to address them – but to do this, you need to be fairly clear about the objective, or purpose, of your communication.



There is what I call a 'spectrum of registers', which is a range of writing tones from slang...all the way through to technical writing. From top to bottom, from most formal to least formal, the spectrum looks something like this:

- Technical
- Elevated
- Formal
- Semi-formal
- Informal
- Colloquial
- Slang

For workplace purposes, we're somewhere in the middle, using formal tones for sophisticated documents, reports and proposals; semi-formal tones for press releases, presentations and invites; and informal tones for most internal communication.

Your choice of tone, as I suggested earlier, is also guided by *who* you're writing to. The individual. And their knowledge, education, experience, emotion...and proximity to *you*.

Using the picture of your target reader and the clear idea of your tone, you then need to write to satisfy readers' basic needs.

The average reader wants to know 'What's in it for me?', not 'What's in it for you?' You've got an idea, product or service to sell, but readers will only buy it or buy *into* it if it *does* something for them.

Think about documents you've written in the past. Do they typically contain more 'ego copy' than 'reader copy'?

Ego copy is what we call statements beginning with the words 'we' and 'our', or the company name. Reader copy refers to statements beginning with 'you' and 'your', or the reader's name.

When translating 'ego copy' into 'reader copy', the trick is to take each line and turn it into a line that speaks to the reader's interest. For example:

"We have been active in the Public Relations arena for ten years."

becomes

"You'll have access to cutting-edge skills, industry expertise *and* local and global contacts, because we've been doing this for ten years now."

Now that you know who you're speaking to and what their needs are, it's time to structure your message. And the best way to do that is to unify it, which brings us to Secret 2:

2. UNIFY; 'MONKEYS CAN ONLY PEEL ONE BANANA AT A TIME'

Poor paragraphing is one of the things that keep my business going - because it's the most common writing error I encounter.

For a start, I find that in much of the writing I work on every day, there's not enough 'visual breathing room', or white space. This makes it hard for the reader to tell where one train of thought ends and another begins.

But good paragraphing *is* easy when you know how, so let's talk about that single, elusive banana: the well-developed paragraph. Here are a couple of tips:

0. Remember, your reader can only peel one banana at a time, so only use one idea per paragraph.
1. Start each paragraph with a 'topic sentence' and then expand on that topic. As soon as your train of thought changes tracks, it's time for a new paragraph.
2. Use an average of three to five sentences per paragraph and five to seven paragraphs per page. Your sentences should be fifteen to twenty words in length and your paragraphs, a maximum of eight lines.
3. Be sure that your paragraphs look balanced. Click on 'File', 'Print Preview' to see the bigger picture.

Finally,

4. Try to make your paragraphs proportional to the length of your document. In other words, use short paragraphs for short letters and long paragraphs for long proposals.

Now balance and proportionality are one thing, but what about content? Let's look at Secret 3, how to:



3. SIMPLIFY BY 'WRITING SIMPLY, POSITIVELY AND ACTIVELY'

[Simplicity]

You've probably heard this before, but it's so important that I'm willing to risk repeating it: While adjectives - like 'exciting' - and adverbs - like 'actively' - are necessary in any writing, make sure that your nouns and verbs are doing most of the work.

After all, writers in the workplace write mostly about people and things, so powerful writing should rely on verbs and nouns for toughness and colour.

Hands up if you've ever used these expressions: 'fond farewell', 'valuable asset', 'crucial role' or 'cordially invite'? Keep in mind that thoughtless adverbs and adjectives are the main culprits in clichés, and that they can cause the reader to lose faith in your powers of discrimination.

Do you agree that, if every crisis is an *acute* crisis, every emergency a *dire* emergency and every event an *exciting* event, then the whole idea of crises, emergencies and events is devalued?

Look at what happens when we remove thoughtless adverbs and adjectives from a sentence:

Original:

In your opinion, what do you think will be the ultimate results of this considerable setback for our projected future sales figures, moving forward?

Edited:

~~In your opinion~~, what do you think will be the ~~ultimate~~ results of this ~~considerable~~ setback for our ~~projected~~ future sales figures, ~~moving forward~~?

End result:

How do you think this setback will affect our future sales figures?

The final version of the sentence is shorter (by thirteen words, or fifty percent). Do you agree that it's also simpler and more vigorous?



Believe it or not, the best simplicity comes from writing as you speak. If you want your writing to be easy to read, write conversationally - so that it sounds in readers' heads as if you're speaking to them.

The closer you come to your natural speaking rhythms and word choices, the clearer and more engaging your writing will be.

For example, would you say something like, "Attached hereto please find..."? No. It sounds unnatural in speech and that's why, in corporate English, it's no longer appropriate.

Stay away from 'therebys' and 'with whiches', and think of simpler, more user-friendly ways to say what you want to say. Don't be guided by Winston Churchill, who, when he was reprimanded for ending a sentence with a preposition, said: "This is the sort of thing up with which I will not put."

There's something else you need to know – and that's that short, tight text is more important in e-mails, e-newsletters and web copy than anywhere else... because web users seldom read webpages word by word.

They scan pages, choosing individual keywords, sentences and paragraphs of interest, while skimming over the rest.

Experts tell us that a massive 79% of web users scan any new page they come across. Only 16% read every word. And who wants to reach only 16% of the audience?

What's the answer? Putting in more time *writing*, so that the web user spends *less* time reading. And ensuring that any web writing comprises fifty percent (or less!) of the original printed piece.

Now that we have a handle on writing simply, let's look at writing positively.

[Positivity]

Try to use positive, definite wording instead of negative, vague wording. For example, say 'We're usually on time', instead of 'We're not often late.' Say 'Our company believes in partnerships', not 'Our company does not stand alone.'

Why do this?

Because readers respond better to positive ideas than to negative ones, and research shows that words like 'no', 'not' or 'unable' can cause unfavourable reactions.



But if you *have* to present negative information, try to reduce its impact by positioning it cleverly:

Good news should appear in a position of high emphasis – at the beginnings and ends of documents, paragraphs and sentences – while bad news should appear in secondary positions: in the centre of documents, paragraphs and sentences.

Now let's look at writing actively.

[Activity]

In most corporate literature, experts agree that it's more effective to write in the active voice than in the passive voice. This is the difference:

The team has reached a decision. vs A decision has been reached by the team.

Active verbs are direct. They invigorate writing, strengthen prose and reduce wordiness. They also emphasise the *who* and the *what*.

Passive is more impersonal; more distanced. It should only be used when the performer of the action is unknown or relatively unimportant, like in this example:

'Today's workplace is blessed with diversity, creativity and solid teamwork.'

The passive voice is considered to be the mark of an inexperienced writer. It also takes up more space, so use it sparingly and with caution – which brings us to Secret 4, or:

4. CLARIFY BY 'KEEPING IT SHORT AND TIGHT'

As far back as the 1800s, author John Ruskin advised writers to 'Say all you have to say in the fewest possible words, or your reader will skip them; and in the plainest possible words or he will misunderstand them.'

The people who read your communication are likely to be busy and impatient. They want their information quickly, so that they can get on with their lives.

For this reason, your message should be like a mini-skirt: short enough to warrant a glance...and tight enough to have an impact!



Sometimes you may have a lot to say, and it may not be possible to keep it brief. But brevity is not the same thing as conciseness – and conciseness is *always* possible. All you have to do is convey *each point* as briefly as you can.

To achieve this, keep your sentences short. Less really *is* more. Strip every sentence down to the basics by crossing out every word that serves no purpose. How do you tell which words serve no purpose? Start by looking for redundancy, which is the needless repetition of words, phrases or ideas.

Redundant expressions add nothing to what has already been said; instead, they waste words. So never say something in three weak ways when you could have said it once, effectively.

Raise your hand if you've ever used one of these expressions:

- in (actual) fact
- (important) essentials
- (future) prospects
- (absolute) perfection
- (close) proximity
- eliminate (altogether)
- (complete) monopoly
- consensus (of opinion)
- during (the course of)
- (again and) again
- (each and) every
- (past) history
- (total) ban
- (needless to say)
- (free) gift
- (original) source
- (regular) monthly meetings
- short (space of) time
- join (together)
- refer (back)
- (empty) space
- (basic) fundamentals

Don't feel bad if you're guilty of using these phrases. After all, President Bush wasn't embarrassed when he expressed concern that so many of America's imports were coming from *overseas*!

Let me give you an example of tackling redundancy. A client of mine in the film industry recently sent through a script for editing. The brief was: make it shorter. Tighter. More punchy. More powerful. I read through the script and was able to cut it down by almost 50%, because it was plagued with sentences like this:

How many times do I have to ask you not to keep on repeating yourself again and again?

which, when the redundancy is removed, becomes: Don't repeat yourself.



Finally, in terms of keeping things short and tight, I urge you to guard against wordiness when writing on a computer.

The click and flow of the keys can be seductive and you may find yourself waffling on just to experience the pleasure of running your fingers over the keyboard and watching your words appear on the screen. Read your writing later and ruthlessly delete the excess.

And when you get to the end of your document and you're on the verge of sending it, presenting it or signing it off, remember Secret 5, which urges you to:

5. SPECIFY, BECAUSE 'IF YOU DON'T ASK... YES... YOU DON'T GET!'

In a survey, one thousand CEOs were questioned as to why they didn't buy from particular salespeople. And a whopping seventy per cent of them said, "Because I wasn't asked to".

For this reason, the closing paragraph of any communication should contain your 'call to action', where you say what you want to happen next. By *asking*, you're more likely to *get*. You have more control and your reader is clear as to what you need and when you need it.

Stay away from vague expressions like: 'Please respond as soon as possible.' Instead, give specific deadlines like: 'Please confirm by Friday 10 March at 1pm.' or 'Please reply by the end of today.'

But if you know you're writing to someone who'll never, ever get back to you - or, if asking isn't relevant or appropriate - just use the end bit to reinforce your most important message. After all, the conclusion of your document is the part that readers recall most clearly. It's your 'last word', so make it count.

CONCLUSION

Experts estimate that up to 30% of your time at work is spent on written communication, *even if that's not strictly your job!* So it's absolutely vital to develop your writing skills – not only because of the time involved, but also because your success may depend on it.

Keep in mind the TUSCS secrets; namely, Target, Unify, Simplify, Clarify, Specify, and be guided by Ernest Hemingway, who said: "I have tried simply to write the best I can. Sometimes I have good luck...and write *better* than I can."