Tiffany Markman's

All-New Mini Skirt Guide
TO Business Writing

2017

In the 10 years I've been teaching business writing, no analogy has worked as well as the 'Mini-Skirt Guide to Business Writing'. I came up with it in 2009, to convey the fact that writing for business should be short and tight, while covering all of the important things. Today, five years later, that skirt is – by necessity – even shorter, even tighter and even more discriminating about what the 'important things' are.

There are also new characteristics to the mini-skirt, in addition to shortness and tightness. These include appropriateness, cleanliness and structure.

So, this is an all-new Mini-Skirt Guide. Ironically, however, it's longer than my first one. But I hope you'll agree that it covers all of the important things.

Enjoy.

tiffany.

Tiffany Markman

cell: 082 492 1715
e-mail: tiffany@tiffanymarkman.co.za
twitter: @tiffanymarkman
web: www.tiffanymarkman.co.za
est. 2005 │ full member: SAFREA │ Empowerdex-certified (L4)

print & web copywriting │ editing │ writing training │ reviewing

Layout by Daniel Janks │Artwork by Andy Cohen

1.

The classic mini-skirt. Just think about that for a moment. If you were around in the 80s, think Julia Roberts in the film *Pretty Woman*, and that mini.

By definition, the mini-skirt is short (several generous centimetres above the knee) and tight (enough to warrant careful planning when getting out of a car, say). And, for me, these should be the two guiding features of good business writing for readers that operate in an impatient and overloaded world.

Here's an easy rule:

Say it once, using the least and smallest words possible.

Or, keep it as brief as possible (short) and as concise as possible (tight).

Got it?

Let's now expand this into the different parts of writing:

A. Short, tight sections

As its length increases, business writing becomes more difficult to read. Your readers are busy (they receive an average of 3,500 commercial messages a day) and they don't have the time or attention span to wade through lines and lines of wording.

For this reason, breaking your text into several shorter sections makes it more digestible. Now this works across emails, letters, documents, reports and even long pieces of writing, because it relies on a technique that I call 'chunking'.

A chunk is a series of related paragraphs, either numbered or not, that are set off from the chunks before and after it. You can use sub-headings, bulleting, numbering or other formatting functions to highlight the separation between your chunks.

Are there any other visual tricks for chunking?

Yes. If it's appropriate to the document, audience and topic, you can use 'highlights': colour to boost the content's visual appeal; extracts of important passages of text; overviews that give insight; or graphics. When entering into a long or complex chunk, a paragraph that describes the content's details can also demystify the subject.
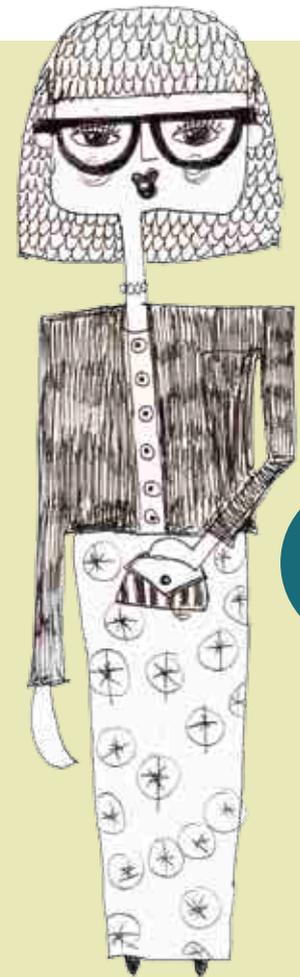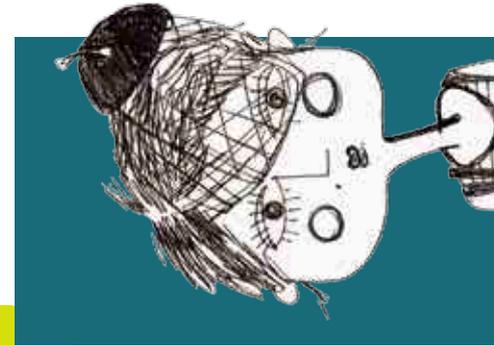
B. Short, tight paragraphs

In general, the paragraphs in business writing are far too long.

To give you an example, I work for several banks as a writing trainer and, whether I'm looking at emails, letters or documents, I regularly see blocks of 10-20 lines with no spaces open between related topics. These are exceptionally hard to read, and are also a sign of muddled thinking or confused logic, in many cases.

For this reason, when I edit for my clients, one of the first things I do is add more white space between sentences.

I create shorter paragraphs...

To give you some rules, each paragraph should contain only one message. So as soon as your train of thought changes, it's time to press 'Enter'. This translates into 4-5 lines per well-structured paragraph, on average. And the white space (what I call 'visual breathing room') in between the paragraphs gives your writing a balance between information overload and a clean, attention-grabbing interface.

C. Short, tight sentences

To go back to the example of my students in the private sector, I see sentences that are – on average – 20-25 words long. (I've even seen some truly hideous 60- to 80-word sentences, but let's not talk about those for now…)

The problem is that long sentences are extremely hard to read. By the time your reader gets to the end, he or she can't remember what you said at the beginning. Plus, there's more room to mess up your grammar if you're not a confident writer.

Rudolf Flesch, author of *The Art of Plain Talk* and co-creator of the Flesch-Kincaid Readability Score that I'll cover later, says the ideal average sentence length is 14-16 words. In business writing you can extend this to 18 words, but that's your limit.

What if it's a long document and I can't keep it short?

Well, you *can* keep it tight. Let's say you have a complex issue to cover and it's impossible to be brief, so you can't possibly keep it short. But you can still ensure that each point is expressed briefly and you will then have achieved conciseness.

Then there's the option of printing out the document.

Remember that readers can still press 'Print'.

I want you to write short, but I don't want you to 'dumb down' a message just to be obliging. Most people prefer to read long or complicated texts off-screen so they'll happily print lengthy documents that are comprehensive (if they provide necessary detail). And, if usage is difficult to predict, offer a screen version and a link to an easy-to-print page like a PDF file.

Tightness Tip: Remove waffle

In all writing, keep your sentences as short as possible. Less is more. Strip every sentence down to the basics by crossing out words that serve no purpose.

Start with adjectives (like 'strong') and adverbs (like 'quickly'). Ask yourself:

> 'Does this describing word add to the meaning of the sentence? If I remove it, will the meaning change?'

If not, leave it out. If so, put it back. (Note: In 19 of 20 cases, you can do without the describing word if you use good nouns and verbs instead.)
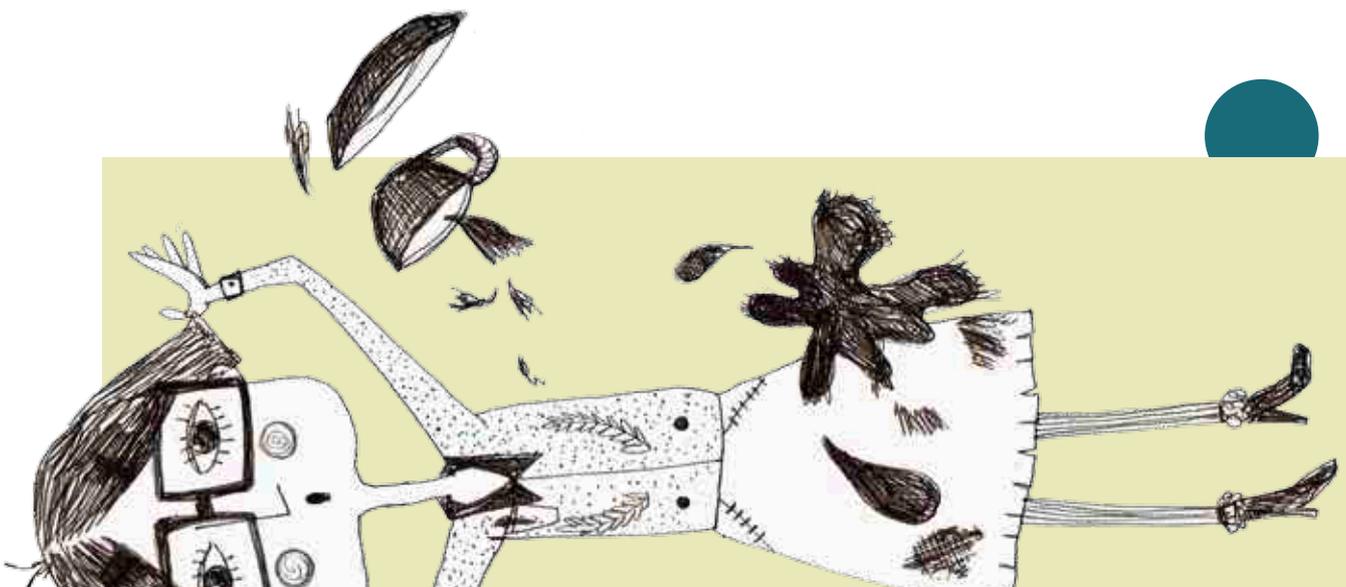
2. APPROPRIATE

Let's go back to that mini-skirt. It's a great item of clothing, but only if a) the wearer has the physique to justify it and b) the setting within which it is worn is suitable. This is an issue of appropriateness, really. In short:

Is the writing suitable given who the writer is, who the reader is and the context in which it will be seen or used?

A. Appropriate to the audience

Well, you can only establish this once you know who you're writing to. And again, if we take my experience as a lesson, the most common obstacle I've seen to producing a powerful or clean document is when the writer doesn't stop to think about who the audience is. There are two sets of questions here; pick one:

Some things to think about when you're defining your audience:

1. Can I describe my readers (age, gender, attitude)?
2. What is their position in the company or in general?
3. What is their background (professional, personal)?
4. How much do they already know about my topic?
5. What are their specific information needs?
6. Can I guess what their feelings toward my document will be?
7. How do I use language they'll easily understand?
8. How do I keep the tone of my document appropriate?

Or:

1. **A**nalysis -   Who is the audience?
2. **U**nderstanding -   What is their existing knowledge of the subject or issue?
3. **D**emographics -   What is their age, gender, educational background, etc.?
4. **I**nterest -   Why are they reading my document?
5. **E**nvironment -   Where will this document be sent/viewed?
6. **N**eeds -   What are the audience's needs in terms of the topic?
7. **C**ustomisation -   What specific interests/feelings should I address?
8. **E**xpectations -   What does the audience expect to learn from the document?

The answers to these questions will help you to formulate writing that is better targeted, that is more focused and that people read and understand. But remember:

You don't have to compile a full demographic breakdown of each reader; you simply need to spend 2-3 minutes thinking about them, before touching your keyboard.

I saw a sign in a beach-side café once:

> 'Please dress for the body you have, not for the body you want.'

Bitchy, but true. And this applies to business writing as well.

Please write in a way that makes the most of the writing skills you have. Don't aim to achieve a high-falutin' style that you suspect is businesslike but that isn't 'you'.

A big part of this is tone.

When we speak, our words account for only a portion of the message we convey. Meaning is also interpreted via body language and eye contact, as well as the intonation, pitch and speed of our voice. And these affect the outcome of our words.

In writing, tone is the writing between the lines: the meaning conveyed in the words we choose rather than just the message we're sending. It encompasses your attitude toward the reader and subject matter, expressed in how you construct the message.

Tone is important because it affects how the reader will respond to your message. But it can be the most difficult part of writing to control because it is subjective: two people may have completely different responses to the same words.

In my opinion, the key to controlling the tone of your writing is to put yourself in your readers' shoes and then carefully choose your words from there. This will help you to craft more focused, effective and strategic business messages.

6.

Tips for Tone:

1. Be careful if, in sensitive situations, you have negative feelings, like anger, frustration or disdain. These are likely to sabotage your writing, which should always be professional, regardless of the topic or your feelings about it.

2. The position of positive and negative information is important. Good news should appear in positions of high emphasis – at the beginnings and ends of documents and paragraphs – while bad news should go in secondary positions: right in the centre (that is, hidden in the middle) of documents and paragraphs.

3. Pronouns like 'you' create closeness, so they can be assets when you have good news: 'You have chosen a top product from our range.' But they should be avoided when you want to soften the tone: 'We have only one of those items left - so it would be a good idea to move quickly in making your purchase.'

3. CLEAN

No-one likes a dirty skirt. Or, more specifically to writing, you lose credibility if there are typos, spelling errors, grammar mix-ups or formatting messes in your writing.
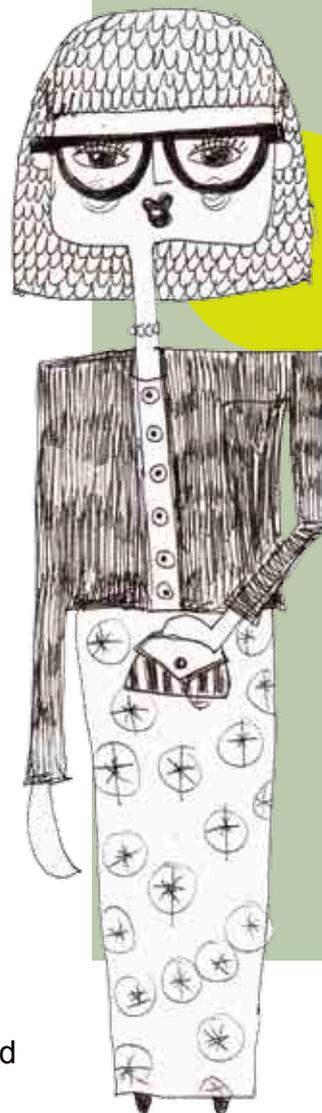
When you commit a misdemeanor in an email, letter, memo, report, proposal or even a text message, there's no going back. You've gone on record as being either clueless or careless – and both are potentially damaging to your reputation.

And here's the worst part. Your reader doesn't have to be a good writer or an eloquent speaker to spot your errors. Typos, inaccuracies and even lazy language usage have a way of jumping off the page and grabbing the reader by the throat.

Bottom line?
Even if you're in a mad rush to communicate your message, take whatever time there is available to check, check and double-check it. Thank you.
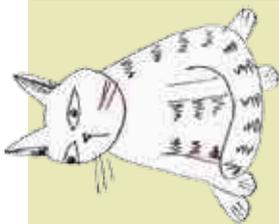
There are many ways to do this, beginning with your word processor's spell-check function. But please don't stop there, because spell-check doesn't know the difference between a 'public holiday' and a 'pubic holiday'. So you'll need to do a couple of subsequent edits (I recommend three, but that's another hand-out…).

4. STRUCTURE

There's nothing like a well-tailored skirt, right? Indeed, there exists a world of difference between a Lanvin designer masterpiece and a cheapie from a sea-side flea market. So, it really helps if you ensure that your business writing is well-tailored.

(Here I'm assuming that you've followed the steps before this one, because writing that is already short, tight, appropriate and clean will lend itself to good structure.)

Structure begins with the Inverted Pyramid: the style of writing developed by newspapers. Using this style, journalists put the most important bits of the story at the beginning, so that the first sentence conveys the most important idea (the conclusion): "After a long debate, Parliament voted to increase taxes by 10 percent."

In other words:

Journalists start with the conclusion, followed by the most important supporting info and then the background. You should do this too because...

1. 79% of your readers don't read the whole story, according to Morkes and Nielsen; they scan. So we want them to get the most important information first.

2. Stories in print need to fit into a given space and they're cut from the bottom, where the waffle is. Long business writing, similarly, is a death-trap.

START WITH THE LEAD THAT ANSWERS THE 5 Ws + H.

ADD EXTREMELY IMPORTANT INFORMATION,

THEN THE VERY IMPORTANT STUFF,

THEN LESS IMPORTANT STUFF.

Follow with the stuff

you've got

left

Source: *Writing For The Media In South Africa*, by François Nel

Whatever your background, it's easy to grasp news writing if you imagine how a friend would tell you about a shooting he or she witnessed. Would your friend say:

"I'd come from the shops, where I'd bought fruit, wine and some French bread. I was walking to my car. A car drove by. Somebody pointed a gun…"

Unlikely. Anxious to share the news, your friend would get straight to the point:

"A man was just shot in the back outside the shops!"

I'm well aware that your job may not involve actual news writing, but you should still consider the Pyramid when analysing information and deciding how to proceed.

5. READABILITY STATISTICS
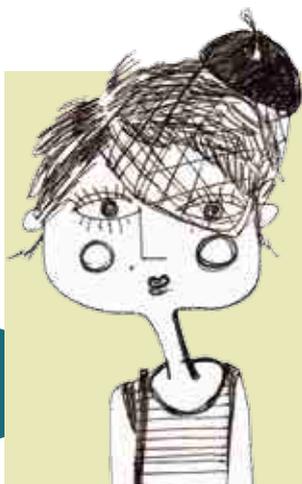
'Readability' describes how easy or difficult something is to read. Luckily, you don't have to monitor your own readability; Microsoft Word does it for you. Here's how to activate the function, depending on which version of Word you use:
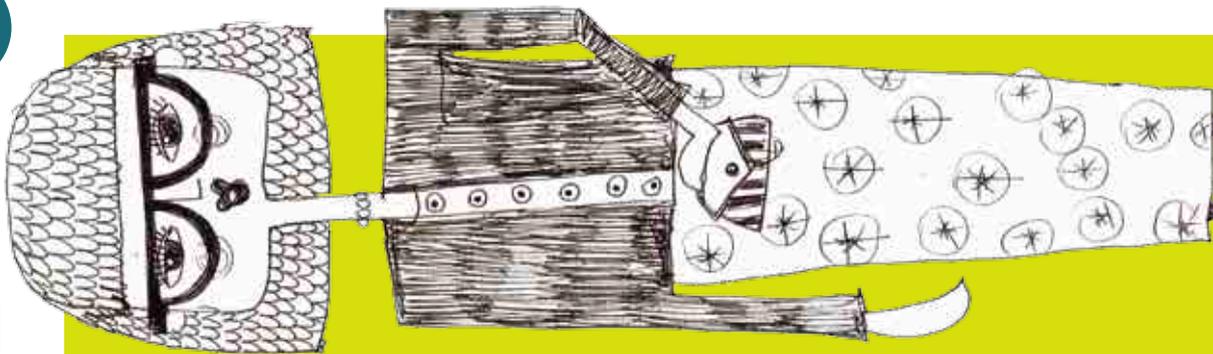
Microsoft Word 2007

1. Open Word.
2. Click on the Office icon (top left).
3. Go down to Word Options.
4. Choose the Proofing tab.
5. Under *When correcting spelling and grammar in Word*, click on *Show readability statistics*.
6. Press OK.

Microsoft Word 2010

1. Open Word.
2. Select File | Options from the toolbar at the top of the screen.
3. The Word Options dialog box should then appear.
4. Click the Proofing tab from the list to the left.
5. Check the box next to *Check grammar with spelling*
6. Check the box next to *Show readability statistics*.
7. Press OK.

Microsoft Word 2013

1. Open Word.
2. Select File from the upper left corner of the screen and double-click to open it.
3. Slide down to the bottom of the list and double-click on Options.
4. Double-click to open the third choice down, Proofing.
7. In the fourth set of options, select *When correcting spelling and grammar in Word*.
5. Tick all 5 boxes there, including *Show readability statistics*.
6. Press OK.

Right. Sorted. Now, each time you run a spell check, the stats will show and you can tailor your text accordingly. But first, let's take a look at the stats that will show:
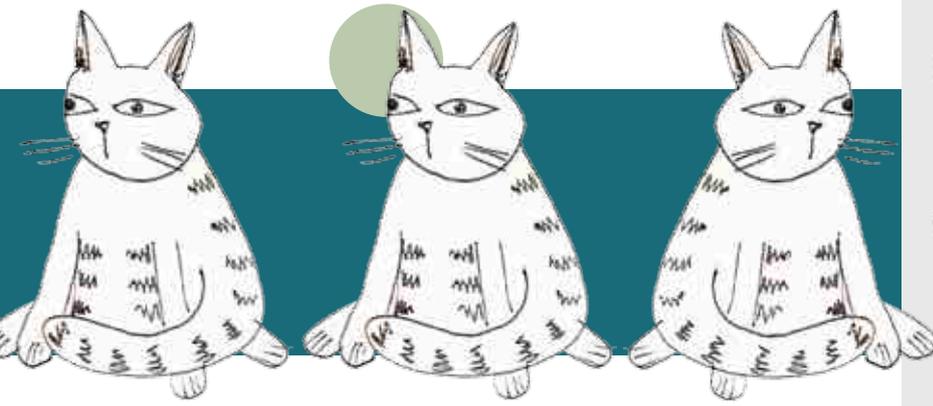
Readability Statistics

Counts
Words   644
Characters   2896
Paragraphs   25
Sentences   62

Averages
Sentences per Paragraph   2,7
Words per Sentence   10,2
Characters per Word   4,3

Readability
Passive Sentences   0%
Flesch Reading Ease   75,5
Flesch–Kincaid Grade Level   5,2

OK

Breakdown

1. Counts: the # of words, letters, paragraphs and sentences in the document.
2. Averages: average sentences/paragraph, words/sentence, letters/word.
3. Readability: % of passive sentences, Flesch Reading Ease, Grade Level.

The really exciting ones are these: Flesch Reading Ease and Grade Level.

Flesch Reading Ease provides an index number that rates your text on a 100-point scale. The higher your score, the easier it will be for your reader to understand your document. (I encourage you to aim for a score of approximately 60 to 70.)

The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level is a rough measure of how many years of (English-language) schooling it would take someone to understand your content.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, just like a mini-skirt, business writing can be short, tight, clean, well-tailored and appropriate to the setting. It just takes a little bit of time, some effort, and a whole lot of practice.

Remember: The House of Gucci wasn't built in a day.

Writing for business is not a talent; it's a skill. It comes not from an accident of birth, but from exercise. And anyone can do it better, using the guidelines. Good luck

ABOUT TIFFANY MARKMAN

Tiffany Markman is a copywriter and editor based in Johannesburg. She specialises in copywriting and editing for websites, marketing material, social media, TV, radio and other channels.

Over the last 10 years, she's worked with over 200 clients.

Tiffany's also a trainer and presenter who offers 20 writing, editing and language workshops and training programmes. These can be run in-house or via one-on-one online coaching. Plus, there's the option to have custom training courses created.

Over the years, Tiffany's spoken for the International-
al Association of Business Communicators, HeavyChefs, the SA Publications Forum, many schools and universities, and a wide range of corporates worldwide.

She's a regular BizCommunity columnist, a contributor to Mail&Guardian Online, Billboard, Freelancentral and Books24, and the Children's Interest Editor of JoziKids.

A long-term member of the Southern African Freelancers' Association (Safrea), Tiffany Markman has a Level 4 BEE status that is formally certified by Empowerdex.