

Excellence in Written Communication

The Benefits of Draining the Corporate Swamp

by
Christine Hunt

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Excellence in Written Communication

The Benefits of Draining the Corporate Swamp

by Christine Hunt, Freelance Creative and Commercial Writer

This sentence contains 13 errors, inaccuracies, or weaknesses which plague today's written business communications:

2 things of primary concern for any business communication is getting across the message and doing it in such a way that your influencing the perceptions of potential customers to effect a positive result.

The difference between
the almost right word
& the right word
is really a large matter
—it's the difference between
the lightning bug
and the lightning.
~ Mark Twain
in a personal letter
to George Bainton,
10/15/1888¹

The above sentence looks typical for much of today's written communication. As e-mail, hard copy memorandum, or project report, the odds are great that you have encountered something very similar. What's wrong with it? It gets its point across, right? Of greater concern...

What do these flaws have to do with your bottom line?

Every piece of written communication that leaves your office reveals more than just the message you intended to send. But is it easy to maintain excellence in written communication? Definitely not.

Author E. B. White remembers his Cornell University English professor, Mr. William Strunk, Jr.

[Professor Strunk] felt that the reader was in serious trouble most of the time, a man floundering in a swamp, and that it was the duty of anyone attempting to write English to drain the swamp quickly and get his man up on dry ground, or at least throw him a rope.²

Professor Strunk threw us all a rope when he authored "the little book" that since 1959 has been a writer's treasure: *The Elements of Style*. Unfortunately this "forty-three-page summation of the case for cleanliness, accuracy, and brevity in the use of English"³ covers a subject that many of today's corporate communicators too often disregard—and they end up floundering in the swamp of detrimental consequences.

¹ <http://www.twainquotes.com/Difference.html>. (Accessed Feb 7, 2007).

² William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White, *The Elements of Style*. 3rd Ed. MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., NY, 1979, xvi.

³ this and the previous quotation: *ibid*, xi.

Common Results of Imprecise Business Communication

These true-to-life scenarios result in revenue losses that could have been avoided.

- ~ The major client never called because the brochure failed to clearly describe the key product components they needed
- ~ Marketing promises the customer a product performance never intended by the design
- ~ IT is frustrated at Accounting's failure to comprehend the urgency of their request
- ~ Marketing gripes about engineers who have no concept of consumer demands
- ~ Construction is delayed when supplies are ordered with the wrong delivery date
- ~ The PM missed a crucial deadline since it took too long to decipher R&D's report
- ~ Customers repeatedly ask for clarification regarding the same products or services

Intangible losses also accrue and are more difficult to quantify

Miscommunication results in lost time, increased costs, and missed sales opportunities. Intangible losses also accrue and are more difficult to quantify, including downturns in employee satisfaction and the erosion of a company's public reputation.

These losses are unnecessary. Valuable expertise is easily accessed through professional freelance creative or commercial copywriters.

Quality Communication Benefits More than the Bottom Line

The Corporate Communication Institute (CCI) at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison, New Jersey, conducted a five year study to understand current practices and identify major trends within the corporate communication functions of Fortune 1000 companies. CCI's three-phase study resulted in eleven key insights into the functions, responsibilities, issues, and opportunities involved in the role of chief communication officer of these corporations.

Key Study Insight #1

In the comments and in the interviews, corporate communication executives indicated a clear need to build trust within all audiences.⁴

Relationship and trust are built on the foundation of high-quality communication. This truth is emphasized by the report entitled *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* published in February 2006 by Insidedge and GolinHarris.

⁴ Michael B. Goodman, Dir., *CCI Corporation Communication Practices & Trends Study 2005: Final Report*. Fairleigh Dickinson University, March 2006, www.corporatecomm.org, 4. (Accessed Feb. 6, 2007)

Insidedge, a leading employee communications consultancy, and GolinHarris, a public relations agency, released a joint study on effective employee communication. Researchers interviewed over 2,300 white- and blue-collar workers and surveyed 1,000 workers in the United States plus 1,000 workers in Great Britain “from senior management to the front lines.”⁵ They introduce their findings with these words:

Effective employee communication can spell the difference between retaining employees and losing them. . . . [A] company that improves its internal communication also increases the likelihood of retaining [those employees] wavering between staying with or leaving their current employer.⁶

What provides the distinction?

The survey found that employees are more likely to trust employers that communicate well internally, and that trust pays off in terms of employee loyalty and retention.⁷

Employees and the companies for whom they work are not the only beneficiaries of excellent written communication. Clear writing can increase customer satisfaction, client approval ratings, and public opinion. Also, the harmonizing of a corporate culture into the cultures of their global offices is dynamically influenced by the words that are used and by the style with which they are presented.

Relationship and trust
are built on the foundation
of high-quality communication.

CCI's *Corporate Communication Final Report*, Key Study Insight #3 encourages multi-national business communicators to create “an effective global corporate culture.”

The opportunity and challenge is for the corporation to address and embrace global issues for competitive advantage, and for multi-nationals engage in “Public Diplomacy” to create a stable and peaceful business environment.⁸

Right communication builds relationships, establishes trust, and creates a more stable, peaceful environment for all those involved. It also facilitates understanding between IT and Accounting and smoothes the two-way communication between R&D and the Project Manager.

⁵ Insidedge. *Should I Stay or Should I Go? U.S., U.K. Workers Confirm that Good Communication Fuels Employee Trust and Retention*. SPG Media Limited, SPG Media Group PLC, Feb. 2006, www.the-chiefexecutive.com/papers/human-capital-management/insidedge/paper1.html. (Accessed Feb. 7, 2007).

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*, 2.

⁸ Goodman, 5.

Written communication involves everyone on the company ladder. Excellent written communication simplifies their lives and enhances everyone's productivity.

Now what about that original sentence?

Though it may, at first, appear to transmit a simple message, the opening sentence declares much more than it intends. Poor writing also proclaims a variety of additional messages such as "I don't want to take the time or effort to do it right."

Lower costs, increased productivity, and establishment of trusting relationships each provide significant impetus for continual improvement in all areas of written communication.

The 13 errors, inaccuracies, or weaknesses

Let's review those 13 flaws and note their inaccuracies (see Table 1). The Table is followed by listings of other common grammar and style issues, then we will have another try at the original sentence.

2 things of primary concern for any business communication is getting across the message and doing it in such a way that your influencing the perceptions of potential customers to effect a positive result

Detailing the Thirteen Flaws Within the Original Sentence

Error or Weakness	Explanation of Why It is Considered Inaccurate
2	beginning a sentence with numeral form rather than numeric word
2	using a numeral for a number less than ten
<i>things</i>	vague
<i>of primary concern</i>	passive voice; also cliché and overused
<i>for any business communication</i>	prepositional error: the 'communications' are not 'concerned,' but their authors should be!
<i>things . . . is</i>	incorrect verb tense; correctly written <i>things . . . are</i>
<i>is getting</i>	passive voice
<i>getting across the message</i>	inaccurate; the desire is to communicate, not long jump
<i>in such a way that</i>	cliché and passive voice
<i>your</i>	wrong word; should be <i>you're</i> for <i>you are</i> — <i>your</i> is a pronoun
<i>influencing the perceptions of</i>	inaccurate and vague; you don't want to influence the customers' perceptions of themselves, you want to influence their perception of you
<i>effect</i>	wrong word; should be <i>affect</i> : you want to evoke change
<i>positive result</i>	vague and overused

Table 1

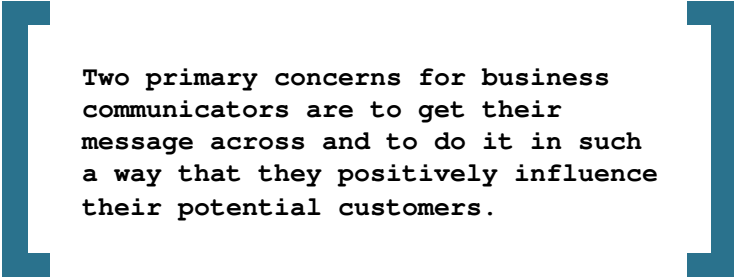
Other common grammar and style issues in current business communications include:

- spelling
- formation of plurals, possessives, and plural possessives
- correct use of pronouns, conjunctions, and qualifiers
- comma and quotation mark usage
- paragraphs which contain two or more topics
- run-on and incomplete sentences
- irregular construction of relative or coordinated ideas

Reference books devote large sections to words which are commonly used incorrectly, such as:

- appraise; apprise
- approve; endorse
- emigrate; immigrate
- loose; lose
- observance; observation
- that; which
- who; whom

Taking each of these weaknesses into account, we can correctly rewrite the sentence this way:



Two primary concerns for business communicators are to get their message across and to do it in such a way that they positively influence their potential customers.

Sound better? Not significantly. Why?

**Simply correcting the errors
is not all that is required for excellent writing.**

Why does it matter, anyway?

I will answer that with an illustration of a statement made by Professor Harry Shaw of Columbia University. He presents a very clear relationship between the transmission of a thought or idea and the need for good punctuation.

What was the last really good movie you saw? Who starred in the lead role? Nicolas Cage? Gwyneth Paltrow? Eddie Murphy? or maybe Cary Grant?

What was the emotion portrayed during the strongest moment in the film? Fear? Amazement? Grief? You can see it now in your mind. The intensity of that emotion—captured by what? The quirk of an eyebrow? Flare of the nostrils? Clinch of the jaw? The picture is burned into your memory.

Now imagine the actor attempting to portray that emotion without moving any part of his or her face. No movement at all. Completely blank. And no inflection in their voice, either; just the rote repetition of words. Do you see that emotion now? Can't you just feel that intensity sizzle off the screen?

No? What happened? Why does it matter, anyway? That's where Professor Shaw's statement weighs in.

When you talk, you do not depend upon words alone to tell your listener what you mean. Facial and bodily gestures can and do add much to the words themselves. . . . The tone and stress of your voice can and do influence the meanings of words you speak Meaning in [speech] is affected by pauses and halts which are often as significant as [the] words themselves. Each of us has probably seen a skilled actor convey ideas and moods without using any words at all.

Similarly, when we write we cannot expect words alone to make clear to our reader what we have (or think we have) in mind. The pauses, stresses, and inflections which occur in speech must be represented in writing by various marks of punctuation if meaning is to be fully clear. . . . Punctuation came into existence solely for the purpose of making clear the meaning of written words.⁹

Right communication builds relationships, establishes trust, and creates a more stable environment for all those involved.

Clarity is uniquely important in the written transmission of thoughts and ideas. Clarity is what “throws the rope” to the reader struggling for understanding. Clarity in writing is accomplished through the correct application of word choice, grammar, punctuation, and compositional style.

How do you know what's right?

How do we determine whether to use *2* or *two*? *back yard*, *back-yard*, or *backyard*?

Construction workers use a plumb line, a bubble level, or a laser sight to verify a foundation is level and the walls are perpendicular to that foundation. Scientists establish a baseline before introducing variables during experimentation. Grammarians compile equally exacting rules and the tolerances within which variants can apply. These rules are compiled into volumes called style guides.

Style Guides

A number of guides govern currently accepted industry styles for

- grammar and punctuation
- titles and headings
- capitalization and abbreviation
- spelling and word usage
- quotations, citations, and references
- manuscript preparation and content organization
- even reduction of and specificity for language bias related to professional sensitivities¹⁰

As you can imagine, these tomes contain hundreds of pages in dozens of chapters—and they are most often written in fine print. (The exception: *The AP Stylebook*; definitely a large print publication.) They also require months of experience with the various volumes to unravel the intricate differences between the styles.

Most industries have their own specific sets of rules. There is *The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation* for the legal fields; *American Medical Association Manual of Style* used by most medical and health-related fields; the *Society for American Baseball Research (SABR) Style Guide*; even the *Wikipedia: Manual of Style* for solving the knotty problems introduced by the diverse forms of English spoken around the globe. Then note:

The Columbia Guide to Online Style (CGOS) by Janice R. Walker and Todd Taylor (*Columbia UP, 2006*) presents a guide to locating, evaluating, translating, and using the elements of citation for electronically accessed sources in both a humanities style (i.e., *MLA* and *Chicago*) and a scientific style (*APA* and *CBE*¹¹).¹²

As you can see, publishers often adopt their variations from one or more of the primary guides. These major style manuals are used as standards across the general publishing fields.

Confused? You're not alone. Even people within the publishing industry must stop occasionally to think through what goes where or how you talk about who said what.¹³

¹⁰ a style guide's fancy way to say "using words that emphasize people's differences"

¹¹ *The Council of Biology Editors (CBE) Style of Documentation in Science and Mathematics* see <http://www.monroecc.edu/depts/library/cbe.htm> (Accessed Feb. 6, 2007)

¹² <http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cup/cgos2006/basic.html> (Accessed Feb. 6, 2007)

¹³ For an in depth look at style guides and what they provide (or don't!), check out: *Guidance on Style Guides: Lessons Learned* by Chauncey E. Wilson, Director, Design and Usability Testing Center, Bentley College. Reprinted from Society for Technical Communication. *Usability Interface*, Vol 7, No 4, April 2001.

<http://www.stcsig.org/usability/newsletter/0104-style.html>. (Accessed Jan 7, 2007).

The Need to Accomplish More with Fewer Resources

The CCI *Corporate Communications Final Report*, Key Study Insight #4, states:

Communication is now more strategic than ever¹⁴

Yet that observation follows Key Study Insight #2:

Even though budgets for corporate communication increase slowly, . . . staff responsibilities increase more rapidly. So following a trend that our research has noted since 2000, and what one communication officer described as “always more to do,” professionals will continue to be asked to be more productive as companies continue to expect corporate communicators to accomplish more with fewer resources.¹⁵

High-quality written communication does not “just happen.” Significant quantities of time, effort, and creative energy are required to produce the written messages that will “drain the swamp” for your customers and employees. There is a way, however, for the business communicator to make the most of available resources and still put forth excellent written communications.

A professional freelance commercial writer offers you more than just “good copy.”

The Freelance Advantage

A professional freelance commercial writer offers you more than just “good copy.”

~ **Reduce Costs**¹⁶ Especially for the small to mid-size company, you access the needed project-specific skills without the added costs of a full-time employee. You also achieve a quality project outcome for less expense than contracting with a large PR firm or ad agency.

~ **Increase Staff Efficiency** You hired your people to do a job. Free them up to do what they do best and let the professional copywriter fill the niche, especially during short-term staffing crunches or for infrequent or seasonal projects.

~ **Get a Fresh Perspective** Clarity is often subject to mental and emotional filters we do not even realize we have in place. The interjection of a skilled third-party communicator can often isolate the sticking points and address all involved to restore understanding.

Often a set of objective “eyes and ears” can establish order in the midst of turmoil, help you determine communication essentials, set project objectives, or define your message’s bottom line.

¹⁴ Goodman. 5.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Peter Bowerman, *The Well-Fed Writer*, Fanove Publishing, Atlanta, Georgia, 2000, 225.

~ *Tap into Valuable Expertise!*

Let's revisit the true-to-life scenarios we encountered earlier and see how the professional freelance commercial copywriter could help you 1.) turn potential losses into enhanced productivity and 2.) aid in the establishment of trusting relationships and smooth, two-way communication. (see Table 2).

What the Professional Commercial Writer Can Provide

Scenario	Expertise
~ The major client never called because the brochure failed to clearly describe the key product components they needed ~ Customers repeatedly ask for clarification regarding the same products or services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Interviewing skills that dig up key pieces of information which often go overlooked. ❖ Reviewing and research know-how to isolate and fill gaps in your presentation or jumps in reasoning or logic. ❖ Defining your audience to eliminate wasted time for both you and your reader. ❖ Organizing details to enable readers to locate and understand vital data. ❖ Speaking the language of the reader.
~ Marketing promises the customer a product performance never intended by the design ~ The PM missed a crucial deadline since it took too long to decipher R&D's report ~ IT is frustrated at Accounting's failure to comprehend the urgency of their request ~ Marketing gripes about engineers who have no concept of consumer demands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Specialized focus on a project to eliminate routine distractions; fewer details are overlooked, potential misunderstandings are addressed. ❖ Catch jargon, specialized vocabulary, and other technical language and "translate" into the vocabulary of the reader. ❖ Third-party objectivity
~ Construction is delayed when supplies are ordered with the wrong delivery date	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Well, sometimes things like that just happen. Be sure everyone's on the same page before the supplies are ordered!

Table 2

Summary

Every piece of written communication that leaves your office reveals more than just the message you intended to send. Excellence in your written words offers you the opportunity to increase ROI, employee and customer satisfaction, even public opinion.

Miscommunication breeds frustration; frustration often immobilizes the creativity required to restate thoughts and ideas. Clarity in the written transmission of thoughts and ideas is what “throws a rope” to your reader struggling for understanding. The expert use of high-quality communication can drain the corporate communications swamp to build relationship and trust between you and your clients, stakeholders, and employees.

Many tools are available to the corporate communicator to facilitate creation of exceptional written materials. Most self-use tools require significant expenditures of time, effort, and creative energy. You can put forth excellent written communication and still make the most of available resources with one effective tool you have in your arsenal: the freelance copywriter.

A professional freelance commercial writer offers you more than just “good copy.” The professional writer can be your avenue to reduced project costs and increased staff efficiency with the objectivity to ease the setting of project goals or the defining of your message’s bottom line. Their thorough interviewing and organizational skills can clear the swamp of miscommunication to enable your readers to land firmly on your dry ground.

Conclusion

Our original, flawed sentence now professionally rewritten:

Excellent business communication
will convey your message or idea
so it is readily received
and understood.

Or, in deference to Professor Strunk:

Excellent written communication will drain the swamp
and throw a rope of understanding to customer, employee,
and stakeholder, the public, and your global community.

About the author:

Christine Hunt has over 30 years of creative and commercial writing experience. Her resume includes over 50 audio/visual, multi-media, and video presentations; four full-length produced playscripts; ghostwriting of four books in the fields of cancer research and nutrition; various newsletters; and 100s of brochures, reports, articles, speeches, speaker supports, and presentations.

Christine taught English and creative writing for over ten years before launching her own company, Right Line Editing and Design, in April of 2005.

She lives with her husband, Kenneth, in western Wisconsin and is a member of the Editorial Freelancers Association.

Contact Christine at RightLineEditing@somtel.net.