



WRITING MATTERS

Measurable ROI from Quality Business Writing

CORPORATE MEMO

Subject: SARBOX

With the surge in corporate oversight required due to the Sarbanes-Oxley Act and myriad scandals, a company's documents—electronic, paper and even text messages—are more and more in the limelight. When a company's business documents are on display, so is its culture. That is why every company should examine how it appears on paper.

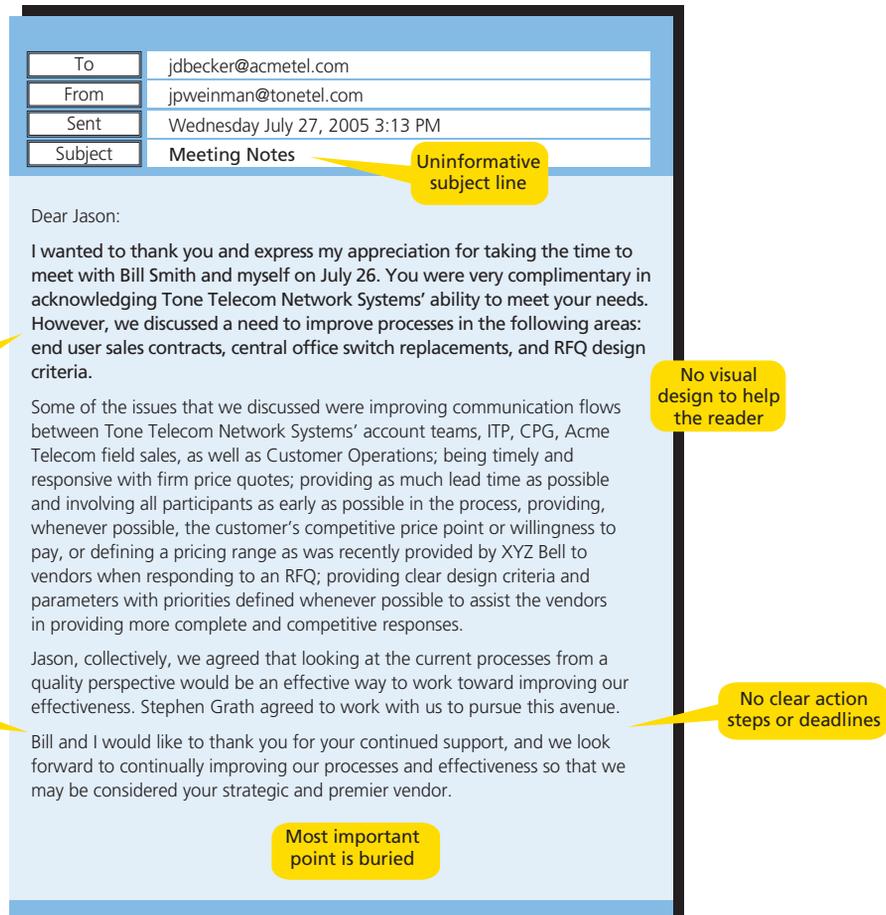
BY DEBORAH DUMAINE

Nobody knows the pain of poor quality writing better than a busy manager. The time spent fixing careless documents—no strategy, messy logic, unstructured paragraphs and poor grammar—eats into vital time needed to manage and lead. In addition, there's the time devoted to cleaning up misunderstandings when a team member's writing alienates a client or senior team member. Yet the results from using documents to drive daily business should not be underestimated.

CORPORATE EFFORTS TO IMPROVE

Writing is a process that, when properly implemented, can create measurable quality. However, companies typically fall into one of three traps. They can accept poor writing as a norm; deny that a problem exists; or accept that they must improve but do not know how to improve, much less how to measure improvement.

What can companies do to eliminate problems caused by poor quality writing? How can they ensure that business documents



contribute to productivity and profitability? Managers who want to face this challenge head-on need to consider three critical questions:

1. What is at risk if our people do not send clear, concise, personable messages?

For example, consider the consequences of sending an e-mail covering several topics if the key message announcing a critical client deadline is obscured. Think about examples that make or break success at your company.

2. Are our business documents, especially e-mail, contributing to productivity?

Unclear documents that result in time wasted on follow-up calls and e-mails are an enormous drain. When you receive a message, do you know immediately what it's about and what you're supposed to do?

3. What kind of culture does our writing project? There's a disconnect if business documents do not reflect the company image or are inconsistent with company brand standards. How do you want to appear on paper: sloppy, stuffy and impolite, or clear thinking and customer-friendly?

If tackling the questions above leaves more questions than answers, then evaluating a strategy to improve your writing culture is the next step. The most powerful way to create change in an organization's writing culture is to make a writing process available to the entire organization and then support it at every level.

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A PROVEN SOLUTION

Reader-focused writing is a proactive process that communicates key messages and drives action. It requires the writer to focus on meeting the needs of the reader. When writers use this process, readers can easily scan for key messages and action items in a format that encourages visual cues like headlines and bullet points. The writer can easily highlight key messages that can be retrieved in half the time.

Consider the illustrated e-mails and the differences noted in the call-out boxes.

Companies whose documents primarily resemble the first sample are missing a chance to gain a competitive edge. Readers waste substantial time trying to locate pertinent information or determine action steps. In the second document, the writer thought about the reader. Headlines and bullets highlight key points such as next steps, actions requested and deadlines. Specific headlines give structure and organization to the document and prevent paragraph overload.

To jdbecker@acmetel.com
From jpweinman@tonetel.com
Sent Wednesday July 27, 2005 3:13 PM
Subject **Action steps from our 7/26 mtg.**

Dear Jason:

Thank you for our meeting. We value your confidence in our ability to meet your needs. Bill Smith and I especially appreciate your suggestions on how we can serve you better.

We agreed to improve these processes by Sept. 30, 2005:

- End-user sales contracts
- Central office switch replacements
- RFQ design criteria.

Tone Telecom's next steps

1. I will fax you a timeline and implementation plan on Monday.
2. We will examine processes from a quality perspective to improve our effectiveness; Stephen Grath is already working with us to put a program in place.
3. I will call you next Tuesday to answer any questions you might have about our implementation plan.

Additional actions Tone Telecom and Acme are considering

1. Streamline communication flow among
 - Tone Telecom Network Systems' account teams
 - ITP and CPG
 - Acme Telecom field sales
 - Customer Operations.
2. Provide as much lead time as possible for all participants.
3. Offer timely and firm price quotes.
4. Provide Acme Telecom's competitive price point or willingness to pay, or define a pricing range. For example, XYZ Bell recently defined a pricing range for vendors when responding to an RFQ.

Enhancing your vendor relations

We also discussed how Acme Telecom can help vendors create complete and competitive responses. Whenever possible, this involves providing

- clear design criteria
- parameters with priorities defined.

Thank you for your partnership

Thank you again for your feedback and cooperation. We will continue to improve our effectiveness so that we will be your premier strategic vendor.

Sincerely,
 J.P. Weinman

THE CONSEQUENCES OF READER-FOCUSED WRITING

If a company's documents mirror the second example—with streamlined text, personable tone, logical flow, clear course of action and the main idea upfront—communications can help achieve higher profitability. Less time spent at writing and reading equals more time available

to accomplish work. Reader-focused writing bolsters a company's competitive advantage and revenue potential by:

- ▶ Using a common language for communicating cross-functionally
- ▶ Fostering positive relationships and reflecting a commitment to the customer—internal and external
- ▶ Optimizing opportunities to succeed with diverse audiences and multiple cultures
- ▶ Selling ideas effectively
- ▶ Gaining cooperation and action
- ▶ Speeding up business processes and sales cycles
- ▶ Improving the retrieval of critical information
- ▶ Facilitating decision-making and response time

Reader-focused writing delivers a measurable return on investment. Surveys show that a robust writing process consistently delivers a 30 to 50% savings in writing time and up to a 50% savings in reading time. If you calculate these savings for both readers and writers, the impact is significant.

SIX STRATEGIES FOR A SHIFT IN WRITING CULTURE

How can managers ensure that all employees communicate consistently and clearly and, therefore, reap the productivity benefits mentioned? Our experience with global companies that have embraced a reader-focused writing approach and coached their employees reveals the keys to success:

1. Adopt and install a simple writing process throughout the organization
2. Model reader-focused documents 100% of the time
3. Monitor employee documents for consistency
4. Encourage a culture that values excellent business communications
5. Set expectations for new employees and provide coaching
6. Reward employees who consistently demonstrate excellence in communications or whose documents result in tangible gains for the company

Clear writing reflects clear thinking. Today, the tension between communicating with speed and ensuring clarity creates a writing challenge for many. But it doesn't have to be that way. Companies that want to gain and maintain a competitive position should accept that writing is a quality process that can be measured and modeled—and then put it into practice. [MW](#)

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