

Top Tips: Basics of Great Written Business Communication



A few words from George Orwell

George Orwell was arguably the greatest writer in the English language of the 20th century. His novels include 'Animal Farm' and '1984'. He is also known for a series of essays, and in 1946 he wrote one called 'Politics and the English Language', in which he criticised the state of written English at that time.

As part of this fascinating essay, he put forward six rules for improving written English, and we could probably do well to adopt them today, nearly 80 years later.

Orwell's six rules were:

1. Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
2. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
4. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
5. Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
6. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything barbarous.



Top Tips: Basics of Great Written Business Communication

Why do we communicate in writing?

The purpose of written business communication is almost always to:

- give information
- persuade people of an argument
- get action

So it's important to write in a way that maximises our chances of doing one or more of these things.

What is great written business communication?

Great written business communication must pass **four key tests**:

1

To understand your message, nobody should ever have to read what you have written more than once.

2

Your writing contains language and content that is appropriate.

3

It follows an effective structure and layout.

4

It achieves the right tone.

Let's explore these four tests further

1. To understand your message, nobody should ever have to read what you have written more than once.

If someone is reading what you've written more than once in order to understand it, it means that you have made your message difficult to access and understand. Don't make reading your message hard work for people; make it easy. Help them understand.

Whether you want the reader to receive information, to be persuaded of your argument, or to take action on something, they must first understand your message.

Be prepared to make a real effort to make your message clear and easy to understand.

It's better that a well educated person finds your writing a bit basic, than a less well educated person finds it confusing and difficult to understand.

And it's worth remembering that not everyone has English as their first language.

2. It contains language and content that is appropriate.

Your writing needs to be clear and accurate, and it should properly explain processes and decisions. It must avoid errors of fact, grammar, spelling, and punctuation.

To maximise the chances of your message being understood at first reading, make every effort to use clear, straightforward words.

Avoid jargon. Jargon is a useful and time-saving shorthand between people working in the same professional area. Every profession has its jargon. But the danger comes when it creeps into our communication with people outside our own professional area. Then it becomes a 'foreign language' – confusing, unclear and ambiguous.

So unless you are 100% certain your message won't need to be read by someone outside your professional area, cut the jargon out!

Be especially careful of TLAs (Three Letter Acronyms). The NHS is absolutely full of them, and not everyone will necessarily know what a particular one means. So avoid them, or at least spell them out in full the first time you use them in a written message.

Also, be particularly vigilant about the jargon that's so familiar to you that you don't even realise it's jargon any more. Remittance. Year End. Ledger. Amortization. Liability. Balance sheet. Capital. Liquidity.

As well as jargon, make every effort to avoid long bureaucratic words. These make your writing long-winded and boring to read. Try to use shorter, clearer words wherever you can. Never forget that some people reading your words may have English as a second or even third language. Their vocabulary may not be so large as yours. Make it easier for them, not difficult.

Also remember that a lot of people who will read your message will be extremely busy. They don't want to read through pages of long bureaucratic words. They want a quick, clear, easy message that they can readily understand.

TOP TIP

Keep your sentences short. Anything over 30 words is too long. The reader's brain will have lost the thread of the beginning of the sentence before they get to the end.

3. It follows an effective structure and layout.

It's really important that your writing follows an effective structure and layout. Doing this achieves two vital objectives:

Navigation. This is about helping readers find their way around your document; moving forward and backward easily without losing their way, and it helps them quickly and easily find key parts of your message.

To achieve effective navigation in a written document, we need to make sure that:

- pages are numbered correctly and in a proper sequence
- in longer documents, there is an index at the beginning that accurately references correct page numbers
- in critical and complex documents, we consider numbering each paragraph, as well as each page.

Foreshadowing. This is about 'signposting' what will come next; helping to prepare your reader's brain for the developing message you are setting out, and making them more receptive to it.

To achieve effective foreshadowing in a written document, we need to make sure that:

- any headings we use are clear, helpful and engaging
- our message follows a logical and meaningful progression from the start of the document to the end.

4. It achieves the right tone.

Whether we intend it or not, everything we write contains a tone of voice. It might be distant, or it might be welcoming. It might be modern, or it might be traditional. It might be bureaucratic, or it might be engaging. Or it might be a combination of these tones, or others.

The point is that we tend to think of written communication as being objective, and devoid of tone ("it's just words on a page"), but nothing could be further from the truth.

The words we choose to use, and the way we arrange them in a document, whether it be a text, an email, a letter, a report, or a job application, contain a tone that transmits itself to the reader.

So be thoughtful about what tone you wish to strike, and how you might use language, structure and layout to achieve that. For example, how would you describe the tone of this 'Top Tips' document?

TOP TIP

Aim for a maximum sentence length of around 20 to 25 words. If a sentence is too long, cut it into two shorter sentences.

TOP TIP

Short paragraphs are not a bad idea either: they make your message stand out more clearly.

The NHS Skills Development Network operates across NHS organisations in England. Its remit is to provide the infrastructure for improving leadership and professional development skills, raising standards and sharing best practice through economy-wide learning.

The Skills Development Network uses a dedicated website, **www.skillsdevelopmentnetwork.com**, to publicise and support its work. The website is the primary source of information for all staff in providing resources for personal and organisational development.

Skills Development activities include but are not limited to:

- Professional Education and Qualifications
- Lifelong Learning and Continuing Professional Development
- Talent Management
- Career Development
- Widening and Improving Technical Skills
- Achieving Excellence
- Partnership Working
- Sharing Best Practice
- Networking
- Accreditation

Other Top Tips available include:

- Stress Management
 - Communicating Financial Information Effectively
 - Team Building
 - Relationship Building
 - Influencing
 - Increasing Productivity
 - Dealing with Change
 - Negotiation in Healthcare
 - Managing Personal Resilience
 - Data Visualisation
 - Writing a Business Case
 - Conducting an Effective Training Session
 - Job Interviews - For Interviewers and Candidates
 - Recruitment: Advertising Top Tips For Busy Hiring Managers
- For more information visit **www.skillsdevelopmentnetwork.com**

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