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Business Writing Training Can Boost Productivity

by Jack E. Appleman, CBC

Flashback to high school English...That thousand-word essay is due tomorrow and you're still 400 words short! Crank up some more sentences. Plug in some fancy new vocabulary words, even if you're not sure what they mean. Don't worry about re-phrasing what's already written. Just keep going until you reach 1,000 or else you'll get a bad grade.

Chances are, many of your employees—from administrative assistants to senior executives—still haven't let go of the high school essay syndrome. Consequently their writing continues to suffer.

Bad writing hurts your organization. Ambiguous e-mails waste employees' time. Poorly organized action plans fail to generate action. Dull proposals that take too long to get to the point are tossed into the circular file before the reader gets to Page 2. The list goes on and on, and it all spells inefficiency and poor productivity. That is why your company should consider a business writing training tailored to the needs of employees.

Organizing a business writing training

First determine the level of interest by asking all managers to identify employees who could most benefit, based on writing proficiency and the number of documents they generate. Consider

sending a notice to the entire staff, if appropriate. Don't forget senior executives, who may be thrilled to take a class that can hone their writing skills. Choose an instructor either from the organization—maybe from the public relations or corporate communications department—or a qualified outside instructor.

Once you receive the list of enrollees, find out the types of documents they write and get some samples. Ask managers to identify specific weaknesses such as cryptic e-mails that repeatedly confuse and offend clients. Sit down with the trainer to review writing samples and the managers' feedback, which will help you determine how to group employees and the types of documents to address. Limit each class to 15 people, and try to group managers and senior executives in their own session.

For every class, the trainer should present a three- to five-hour group workshop and incorporate one-on-one sessions with each participant. These individualized meetings are critical, since every writer has different weaknesses that need to be strengthened. The one-on-one sessions should be held one to two weeks later or immediately after the group workshop.

Can you write as well as you speak?

In the Broadway and Hollywood classic, *My Fair Lady*, Professor Henry Higgins, in his tirade about Eliza Doolittle's pronunciation skills, asks, "Why can't the English teach their children how to speak?" Today, we could rephrase that to, "Why can't businesses teach their speakers how to write?"

Pay attention to those who speak well and notice their directness, simplicity and minimum of words. But ask many of these fine speakers to put their thoughts on paper and a funny thing happens: Their superb communication skills vanish—succumbing to the high school essay syndrome—leaving their text wordy, stuffy and filled with redundancies.

If you'd like to write as well as you speak, try this: Before starting your next document, imagine that your boss is phoning from the airport and has only one minute to hear what you're about to write. You'd be forced to be concise and immediately state the most important point—which is how you should approach every document. Because though most people who read your text don't have to board planes in 60 seconds, they're still impatient. So get to the point quickly!

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Training Tips

In addition to addressing specific documents that participants write on a regular basis, each training should focus on these skills (including some examples):

- *Be clear: Never force the reader to guess critical details.*
VAGUE: I need the recent earnings document as soon as possible so I have enough time to review it before the upcoming sales meeting.
CLEAR: I need the 2003 first quarter earnings report by July 1.
- *Use straightforward language*
STUFFY: You will be advised of our decision on whether your plan meets our requirements by the early summer.
STRAIGHTFORWARD: By June 30, we'll tell you if we can use your plan.
- *Learn to edit*
It's much easier to recognize redundancies, stuffy language and grammatical errors in someone else's text, but effective writers can put themselves in the readers' shoes—and meticulously edit their own documents.
- *Use e-mail properly*
Don't take grammatical shortcuts that lead to unprofessional e-mails. Construct an e-mail like any other document and don't cheat on capi-

talization, punctuation and organization. Take the time to write a meaningful subject line—or change the existing one—that summarizes your message, which may prompt readers to open the e-mail sooner.

- *Get to the point quickly*
Everyone is impatient today, so convey the essential message in the first few sentences—especially with plans, reports and proposals.
- *Be compelling*
Convey enthusiasm for your ideas through powerful and energetic words!

Conclusion

Be sure all participants complete written evaluations at the end of the group training, rating factors such as relevance of content, workshop format and how much they expect their writing to improve. Then, over the next several weeks, ask employees and their managers for some gut reaction on how much difference the training has made and whether additional group or one-on-one sessions should be considered.

If you're not sure whether your employees need a business writing training, read some of their documents. But don't be shocked at the lack of basic skills that you might find. Consider that the vast majority of today's workforce has had no writing

training since high school or college. For most, writing has been a long-neglected skill—which can be dramatically improved through a well-orchestrated training that teaches practical and easy-to-understand techniques.

Armed with better writing skills, employees at all levels can gain more confidence. Highly talented individuals who upgrade their writing can demonstrate leadership skills and catapult themselves to higher positions with more responsibilities. The entire organization wins—through greater efficiency, higher productivity, better morale and other positive results.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jack E. Appleman, CBC, president of SG Communications, LLC in Monroe, NY, is a writer and communications specialist with 25 years of experience. He teaches business writing to organizations and as an adjunct professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison, NJ. Appleman can be reached at (845) 782-2419 or at jack@sgwriting.com.

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