

Writing Skills

Before You Write It Down, Know This

Many people are intimidated by writing. Even so, there are times when writing is the best way to communicate, and oftentimes the only way to get your message across.

Write With Necessary Caution

When writing, be mindful of the fact that once something is in written form, it cannot be taken back. Communicating in this way is more concrete than verbal communications, with less room for error and even less room for mistakes. This presents written communicators with new challenges, including spelling, grammar, punctuation, even writing style and actual wording.

Thankfully, today's technology makes memo, letter and proposal writing much easier by providing reliable tools that check and even correct misspelled words and incorrect grammar use. Unfortunately, these tools are not fail proof and will require your support, making your knowledge in this area important.

The Importance of "Style"

Some of the most basic tips to remember when writing include:

- Avoid the use of slang words
- Try not to use abbreviations (unless appropriately defined)
- Steer away from the use of symbols (such as ampersands [&])
- Clichés should be avoided, or at the very least, used with caution
- Brackets are used to play down words or phrases
- Dashes are generally used for emphasis
- Great care should ALWAYS be taken to spell the names of people and companies correctly
- Numbers should be expressed as words when the number is less than 10 or is used to start a sentence (example: Ten years ago, my brother and I...). The number 10, or anything greater than 10, should be expressed as a figure (example: My brother has 13 Matchbox cars.)

- Quotation marks should be placed around any directly quoted speech or text and around titles of publications.
- Keep sentences short

While the above tips cover the most common mistakes made when writing letters, memos and reports, they in no way cover everything you need to know to ensure your written communications are accurate and understood.

While this takes some practice, there are many sources available to assist with writing style, including “The Elements of Style”, by Strunk and White. One glance in any newsroom or on the desk of even the most accomplished writers and you are sure to find this small, easy-to-read, easy-to-understand, no-nonsense guide to writing. It is clear, concise and perhaps the best book of its kind. If you plan on writing a great deal of letters or even proposals, it is strongly recommended that you pick up this nifty guide, which by the way, will fit in your shirt pocket.

Letter Writing Hints

When writing letters, it is best to address the letter to an individual. And, when beginning the letter with a personal name, be sure to end it with an appropriate closing, such as ‘Sincerely yours’. If you cannot obtain an individual’s name, consider ending it with a more generic (less personal) closing, such as ‘With kindest regards’.

For normal business letters, your letter should start with an overall summary, showing in the first paragraph why the letter is relevant to the reader. It’s not a good practice to make the reader go past the first paragraph to find out why the letter was sent to them.

The body of the letter needs to explain the reason for the correspondence, including any relevant background and current information. Make sure the information flows logically, ensuring you are making your points effectively.

The closing of the letter is the final impression you leave with the reader. End with an action point, such as ‘I will call you later this week to discuss this further’.

The Importance of Careful Proofing

Perhaps the most important thing to remember when writing a letter is to check it thoroughly when it is completed. Even when you think it is exactly what you want, read it one more time. This “unwritten” rule holds true for everything you write – memos, letters, proposals, and so on.

Use both the grammar and spell check on your computer, paying very, very close attention to every word highlighted. Do not place total faith on your computer here. Instead, you should have both a printed dictionary and thesaurus nearby to

double-check everything your computers editing tools highlight, as these tools are certainly not always reliable, for a variety of reasons.

When checking your written communications, make sure the document is clear and concise. Is there anything in the written communication that could be misinterpreted? Does it raise unanswered questions or fail to make the point you need to get across?

Can you cut down on the number of words used? For instance, don't use 20 words when you can use 10. While you do not want to be curt or abrupt, you do not want to waste the reader's time with unnecessary words or phrases.

Is your written communication well organized? Does each idea proceed logically to the next? Make sure your written communications are easy to read and contain the necessary information, using facts where needed and avoiding information that is not relevant. Again, outline the course of action you expect, such as a return call or visit.

Close appropriately, making sure to include your contact information. While this may seem obvious, it is sometimes overlooked and can make your written communications look amateurish. This can diminish your chances of meeting your written communication's goals.

You want to master the art of writing?

Contact our Counselor.