# Contents

**Introduction**  

1  

**The Basics**  

1  Developing a Professional Style  
2  Getting Started  
3  Writing a First Draft  
4  Editing  

**Common Types of Business Writing**  

5  Correspondence  
6  Memos  
7  Proposals, Plans, and Reports  
8  Critical Feedback  
9  Resumes and Cover Letters  

**Numbers and Visuals**  

10  Writing about Numbers  
11  Data Visualizations  
12  Slide Decks
# CONTENTS

Writing for Public Audiences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Instructions and Forms</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Writing for Media</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Commentary</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Public Speaking</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Acknowledgments</strong></td>
<td>121</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Notes</strong></td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Index</strong></td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Writing is an essential skill in today’s economy. We rely on words more than ever in the digital-age workplace, on messaging platforms and social media as well as in classic forms like memos and reports. And given how much reading is done on mobile devices, being able to write succinctly is critical to workplace success.

Clear and direct language—free of needless words and jargon—improves communication within an organization and supports informed decision-making. People who write well on the job are more effective at carrying out their organization’s mission and more likely to advance professionally.

The primary audience for this book is professionals in the first decade of their careers, whether in the corporate world, at a non-profit organization, or in the public sector. If you are one of these people, you may still be developing the skill of writing an effective email communication, a persuasive memo, or a compelling slide deck. If you struggle with the fundamentals of writing, you may not be ready for this book. But if you can string together sentences and are looking for ideas on how to make your writing more accessible and powerful, Writing on the Job is for you.

This book will also be useful to people further along in their careers who find themselves with new responsibilities—or new communications platforms—to navigate. For example, the book explains how to write for social media and advises on tasks assigned to managers and executives, such as providing critical feedback through performance reviews or delivering a speech.
This book draws on my own experiences writing on the job for more than twenty-five years, in the White House and on Capitol Hill as well as in the private sector. It also relies on techniques I’ve developed in the classroom at Princeton University, where I train young professionals to write clearly and effectively. The book begins with the basics: how to develop a professional style, get started on a piece of writing, create a first draft, and edit it into a strong final product. It then offers advice on more than a dozen forms of writing, from a one-line tweet to a lengthy report, using concrete examples and templates. The book also provides guidance on how formal or informal to allow your language to be, and how to strike the right tone so your message gets heard. Throughout, it emphasizes the “bottom line up front” approach used by the US military to ensure efficient communications.

The goal is to help you write effectively on the job—and enjoy doing it!
Index

abbreviations, unnecessary, 26
abstract words, 26–27
accent marks, 37
affect vs. effect, 33
Angelou, Maya, 29
apostrophes, 30–31
appendix, in a memo, 54, 58; in a slide
deck, 84
audience, 8–9; choosing examples for, 17–18;
cover letters and resumes and, 66–67, 
68; instructions and forms and, 98;
public speaking and, 113–118
averages, numerical, 76

Bezos, Jeff, 53
blanks, leaving and filling in, 15
blogs, 108
bold print, 5, 7, 48, 54, 61, 87
Bono, 18
bottom line up front (BLUF), 2, 13, 14–15;
avoiding in critical feedback, 13, 63; in
commentary, 109; in correspondence, 43, 
47, 50; in memos, 55, 58; in proposals, 61
Buffett, Warren, 8
bullet outlines, 11–12; used for memos, 56;
used for speeches, 115; used to write 
headings, 14
bullet points, 6–7, 11–12, 16; in email, 48; in
letters, 50; in memos, 54, 56; in press
releases, 102; in proposals, 61; in resumes, 
68; in slide decks, 85, 89; in talking points, 
111–112

charts, 79–82. See also data visualizations
closings, email, 48–49; letters, 50
colons, 36
commas, 16; in messaging, 51; mistakes
with, 31–32, 105; Oxford, 36; serial, 36
commentary, 108–110
correspondence: best practices across
platforms for, 43–45; email, 43–44, 
45–50; letters, 50; messaging, 51–52
cover letters, 69–71. See also resumes
critic, thinking like a, 27, 107
critical feedback, 63–65
criticism sandwich, 63–65
dashes, 36; in closings, 47–48; in
salutations, 46–47
data visualizations: designing basic,
79–82; importance of simplicity in, 79;
used in memos, 56; used in reports, 62;
used in slide decks, 91; using color in, 87
distractions, avoiding, 11
ing: checking your facts in, 28–29;
finding a second pair of eyes for, 37–39;
fixing mistakes in, 29–37; omitting
needless words in, 20–24; pruning out the
jargon in, 24–27; reading your writing
aloud in, 20; summarizing your writing
in, 20; taking time away from the screen
for, 19–20; thinking like a critic in, 27;
time needed for, 19; using hard copies, 20
e.g., 34
Elements of Style, The (Strunk and White), 20–21

elevator pitch, 112–113

e-mail, body of, 47–48; closings, 48–49; communicating emotion in, 44; company policies and, 44; formality of, 43–44; opening niceties, 47; salutations, 46–47; signature block, 49; subject lines, 45–46; thanks yous and, 45, “to” and “cc” lines, 49–50

e-mail newsletters, 108

e-mail pitches to journalists, 103–104

emojis, 44, 51–52
et al., 34
etc., 34

examples, concrete, 16–18; in forms, 99; in commentary, 109

exclamation points, 44–45

fact checking, 28–29

feedback, critical, 63–65

first drafts: illustrating your ideas in, 16–18; keeping sentences and paragraphs short in, 15–16; leaving blanks as you write, 15; stating the bottom line up front in, 13; using headings in, 14–15

footnotes, 58

foreign words, 37

formal language, 23

formatting cues, 6–7

gesturing during speaking, 118

getting started: avoiding distractions in, 11; preparing a bullet outline in, 11–12; starting early, 10; using your voice in, 11

GIFs, 44, 52, 106

grammar, 30, 34, 38

graphs, 79–82. See also data visualizations

hard copies, 20

hashtags, 106

have vs. of, 33

headings, 14–15; in memos, 56, 59; in slide decks, 85, 89

Hemingway App, 8

humor, 106, 116

I, vs. me (vs. myself), 32–33

i.e., 34

icons, 85

illustrating ideas with examples, 16–18

infinitives, split, 36–37

inverted pyramid, 13

instructions, 100

jargon: avoiding in communications with journalists, 103; avoiding in instructions and forms, 98; avoiding in memos, 54; avoiding on resumes, 68; avoiding with certain audiences, 8; editing to prune out, 24–27; used in business, 25–26

journalists, writing for, 101–104

King, Stephen, 10

King, Martin Luther, Jr., 115

larger amounts, words that suggest, 22

Latin abbreviations, 33–34

letters, 50; cover, 69–71

lose vs. loose, 33

Luntz, Frank, 113

media: writing commentary for, 108–110; writing for journalists in, 101–104; writing for social, 105–107

memos, 53–59; formatting of, 58–59; functions of, 53–54; persuasive, 57; structure of, 54–56; style of, 54

messaging platforms, 51–52; communicating emotion in, 44; company policies and, 44; formality of, 43–44; thank yous and, 45

metaphor, 17–18, 114

mistakes in writing, 29–37, 71

Morrison, Toni, 10
narrative arc, 113–115
numbers: avoiding false precision with, 77–78; avoiding percentage confusion with, 76–77; being careful with averages of, 76; choosing relatable units in discussing, 78; comparing apples to apples in discussing, 77; “doing the math” with, 75; providing context about, 75–76; using symbols with, 78
Obama, Barack, 17
omitting needless words, 20–24
100 Ways to Improve Your Writing (Provost), 15
op-eds, 108–110
outlines, bullet, 11–12; used for memos, 56; used for speeches, 115; used to write headings, 14
paragraphs and sentences, short, 15–16
parentheses, 36
percentages, 76–77
performance reviews, 63, 64–65
persuasive writing, 38; in commentary, 109–111; in memos, 54, 57
photographs, as a backdrop when speaking, 119; in slide decks, 85, 86, 90, 91; in social media, 106
pitch decks, 84
plain language guidelines, federal, 14
plans, 61
precision, avoiding false, 77–78
prepositions, at the end of sentences or phrases, 35–36
press releases, 101–103
principal vs. principle, 33
procrastination, 10
pronouns, 34–35
proposals, 60–61
Provost, Gary, 15
public speaking: talking points for, 111–113; visuals for, 119; written remarks for, 113–119
punctuation in messaging, 51
punctuation in social media, 105
Q&As, 100
qualifiers, 21–22
questions, posing in speeches, 114
quotations, accuracy, 28–29; avoiding in signature files, 49; quotation marks, 31; in slide decks, 85–86, 87; in writing for media, 101, 102, 103, 104, 107
Raphaelson, Joel, 9, 117
reading level, 8
reading your writing aloud, 20, 25, 37
reports, 62
request for proposal (RFP), 60–61
respectful writing, 6, 9, 27, 35
resumes: action-oriented verbs in, 68–69; avoiding insider jargon on, 68; considering the audience for, 66–67; cover letters and, 69–71; page length of, 67–68; style of, 68
Roberts, John, 117
Roman, Kenneth, 9, 117
rule of thirds, 86
salutations: cover letters, 70; email, 46–47; letters, 50
secolons, 31–32, 36, 105
sentences and paragraphs, short, 15–16
Siniff, John, 108
slide decks: basic rules for designing, 83–89; different purposes for, 83–84; presenting, 93–94; structuring, 89–93
smaller amounts, words that suggest, 22
social media, 105–107
sourcing of information, 27, 29; accuracy of, 28; in commentary, 110; in email, 46; in memos, 58; in slide decks, 87
spelling, 29–30, 37, 38
split infinitives, 36–37
statements for media, 104
strategic plan, 60
storytelling, 114, 116
Strunk, Will, 20–21
subject line, email, 45–46; memo, 59
symbols, 78
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Talking points, 111–113</th>
<th>Verbs, 23–24; action-oriented, 68–69; weak, 69</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Textspeak, limiting use of, 51</td>
<td>Visual tools: data visualizations, 79–82; for public speaking, 119; slide decks, 83–94; for social media writing, 106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That, 21</td>
<td>Weak words and phrases: on resumes, 69; for starting sentences and clauses, 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The fact that, 21</td>
<td>White, E. B., 20–21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They, used as a singular, 34–35</td>
<td>White paper, 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To vs. too (vs. two), 33</td>
<td>Writer’s block, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition words and phrases, 16</td>
<td>Writing That Works (Roman and Raphaelson), 9, 117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truss, Lynne, 16</td>
<td>USA Today, 108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter, 105</td>
<td>US Department of Defense, 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty, words that suggest, 21–22</td>
<td>USA Today, 108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlining, 7, 68</td>
<td>Writing That Works (Roman and Raphaelson), 9, 117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>