



Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	1
The Basics	
1 Developing a Professional Style	5
2 Getting Started	10
3 Writing a First Draft	13
4 Editing	19
Common Types of Business Writing	
5 Correspondence	43
6 Memos	53
7 Proposals, Plans, and Reports	60
8 Critical Feedback	63
9 Resumes and Cover Letters	66
Numbers and Visuals	
10 Writing about Numbers	75
11 Data Visualizations	79
12 Slide Decks	83

Writing for Public Audiences

13	Instructions and Forms	97
14	Writing for Media	101
15	Commentary	108
16	Public Speaking	111
	<i>Conclusion</i>	120
	<i>Acknowledgments</i>	121
	<i>Notes</i>	125
	<i>Index</i>	129



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.

2 INTRODUCTION

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, 63–64, 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
- editing: 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
- email, 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
- email newsletters, 108
- email 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
- semicolons, 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

- talking points, 111–113
textspeak, limiting use of, 51
that, 21
the fact that, 21
they, used as a singular, 34–35
to vs. too (vs. two), 33
transition words and phrases, 16
Truss, Lynne, 16
Twitter, 105
- uncertainty, words that suggest, 21–22
underlining, 7, 68
US Department of Defense, 13
USA Today, 108
- verbs, 23–24; action-oriented, 68–69;
weak, 69
visual tools: data visualizations, 79–82;
for public speaking, 119; slide decks,
83–94; for social media writing, 106
- weak words and phrases: on resumes,
69; for starting sentences and clauses,
24
- White, E. B., 20–21
white paper, 60
writer's block, 10
Writing That Works (Roman and Raphaelson),
9, 117