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Customer Communications

"Business Writing Fundamentals"

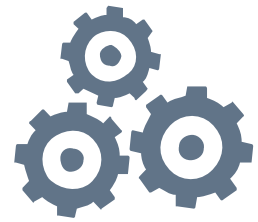
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Edwin specializes in communications for Tarkenton Companies in a variety of media, and is responsible for developing, producing, and maintaining content across multiple channels. Focusing especially on the written word, Edwin works to find the right match of voice, audience, and medium for every message. His background ranges from journalism and blogging to publishing and technical writing, each accompanied with their own unique style and requirements.

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Introduction

Successful businesses thrive by creating lasting relationships with their clients and customers. They don't just get someone to come in once and buy—no matter how much they spend. They build something that lasts. And for that to happen, communication is key.

Some of the most common tools business owners use to communicate with customers are newsletters, welcome messages, and mailer letters. They're cost-effective, simple ways to reach out, share news, and leave something of value for the reader. But for all their simplicity, these tools have a requirement that feels like a huge obstacle to some business owners: writing. It's easy to sit down at the desk, open up a blank document, and stare at the white screen and the blinking cursor. You're a business owner, after all, not Stephen King! What are you supposed to do?

But the truth is, you don't have to be a literary genius to write clear, compelling messages that help build your business's brand. By following some basic guidelines and learning some fundamentals, you can be confident that your writing looks and feels professional, and communicates exactly what you want to your audience.

In this guide, we'll look at how to organize your thoughts, create an authentic voice, and follow the fundamentals of English grammar. That's the simplest path to professional and compelling communication.

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Organization: Where Do I Begin?

Before you can produce good writing, you have to have good planning. You have to know what you're going to do before you try to put words on paper (or a screen). That means taking the time beforehand to organize your thoughts—and then keep your writing organized, too.



The Purposeful Writer

First, **know your audience**. Who are they? Do you want to send this to all of your customers, or a particular segment? That will determine a lot about how you proceed. Are your customers all local, or are you communicating to people all over the country (or even globally)? A local audience will have much different interests from a far-flung one. Do you cater more to younger customers, or older ones? More men or women, or a balance?

Is this a group of adventure-loving outdoorsmen, or office workers? This is the kind of customer profile you've probably done for your marketing and sales efforts—but it's very effective for customer communication, too. If you're narrowing down and targeting a specific segment of your customers, then you should certainly use that knowledge here, but knowing the broader traits of your audience helps when you're messaging out to all your customers, too, or even to brand new customers you don't know anything about yet.

Next, your writing should **have a purpose**. Why are you sending out this message? Is this going out to new customers to help them get better acquainted with your brand? Do you have information about new promotions, services, or products that you want your customers to know about? Or maybe it's a periodic message to help people keep your business at the top of their mind. Depending on your purpose, you'll change your approach. A "welcome" message, for example, would need a lot more information about your business, who you are, and what you do. A "top of mind awareness" communication, on the other hand, might focus more on useful information, helpful tips, and passing along good content you've found elsewhere that might be of interest to your audience.



Getting to the Point

As you begin to write, resist the temptation to write a stream of conscience, whatever floats through your head. Instead, based on the purpose that you've determined, come up with a **series of points** that you want to make sure your audience gets. Then write about each of those points, and **transition smoothly** from one to the next, so that readers know when you are finished with one point and moving on to the next. These points might be actual "points," in a persuasive piece, or distinct pieces of information. What's important is making sure that your reader can tell what your main points are, and isn't just lost in a sea of text.

Remember, the written word and the spoken word are very similar, but they aren't the same. We don't communicate in writing the same way we would in a conversation. When we talk with someone, words flow out, we pick up and drop ideas in midstream all the time, and jump around making constant connections that eventually come back to the main point. In writing, you have to **stay more focused**. You can cover all the same information, but it has to be in a logical order, flowing from one idea to the next, rather than the pell-mell organization of a conversation. Here's an important tip: put your **most important point first**, and your **second-strongest last**, with other ideas in between. You want your strongest up front to capture the reader's attention, and a strong ending so that you leave a good final impression.

To help keep ideas focused—and make it easy for readers to pull out your main points—**use headings, bullets, lists, and short paragraphs.** These not only help you as a writer organize your ideas, but they are also visual markers for readers. When they see a list or series of bullet points, they know these are all related ideas.

When they see headings, they know what you're talking about and also when you move on to the next idea. And short paragraphs make it easy to pick out key words and topics, especially when you're writing something that will be viewed on a computer screen. Long paragraphs quickly turn into walls of words online, an obstacle to the reader; short paragraphs give a sense of progress moving from one to the next. Write enough to cover the subject, but concise enough to keep the reader moving forward.

"The written word and the spoken word are very similar, but they aren't the same."



Storytelling Techniques

Finally, always **use an introduction and a conclusion.** The introduction, in particular, is a frequent stumbling block for would-be writers. A helpful approach is to write the introduction and conclusion after writing the main body of your message. You can write the introduction last, if you want to! Think of any piece of writing like a story. Whether it's a book or a movie, a story's main plot covers all the action in the main part of the story. But before the story really starts, there's an

introduction that sets the stakes, and prepares you for what's coming. When you've already written the main part of your message (the story), that's what an introduction should do: set the stakes by stating what you're writing about and explaining why it matters and why the reader should be interested, and then give a quick preview of what they're going to get by listing the main points or ideas to come.

The conclusion has a similar function. In a story, the end doesn't come as soon as the bad guy is defeated (or whatever might happen to be the plot of the story you're reading). Instead, after the main action is completed, there's a final scene that resolves the story. The storyteller makes sure we understand what happened, and what happens next. How did what just happened affect the characters? How has their trajectory changed from where they were before the story began? The conclusion of any customer communication does the same thing: restate the main points that readers should have taken away from your message, and then give them a next step to take. Here's what just happened, and here's what you can do now. So the introduction tells people what you're going to tell them, the main body tells them, and the conclusion tells them what you just told them. It might seem repetitive at times, but it's the clearest, best way to communicate an important idea.

"Think of any piece of writing like a story."

Voice: Who's Writing This, Anyway?

While organizing your information properly is an essential first step, what really can help you stand out in customer communications is developing an authentic voice that shines through in every email, letter, card, and message. If you get it right, your writing personality will help customers remember you and your business. So how do you create a voice?



"Readers can spot a fake a mile away; writing in an unnatural voice comes across forced and, well, just a little bit off."

Be Yourself

First, **write naturally**. I mentioned earlier that the written word and the spoken word are similar but not the same. It's true with how we organize our thoughts but it's also true with your voice. You wouldn't just transcribe yourself talking about a topic, but you want to capture the feeling of how you talk. Is your voice passionate, detached, ironic, clever, or learned? The voice in your customer communications should match the tone you've set in your other marketing materials, whether you focus on your expertise, a sense of humor, or any other tone. Whatever voice you use, it should be *you*. Don't feel like you need to throw in some jokes just because you know other people do it—unless that kind of clever, amusing voice comes naturally. Readers can spot a fake a mile away; writing in an unnatural voice comes across forced and, well, just a little bit *off*. Not only will people respond better to your own voice, but it's a lot easier for you to write in, too!



Who Are You Trying to Impress?

The second tip (or pair of tips, I suppose) is related to the first, but deserves its own section: **hold the thesaurus** and **go easy on the jargon!** A common mistake writers make is trying to use the biggest, most impressive words they know (or that the thesaurus knows) so that everyone knows how smart they are. Don't do it! First of all, reaching for the "big words" comes at the cost of clarity. Sure, you've got a fancy word in there, but what good is it doing you if nobody knows what you're trying to say?

Communication requires shared understanding for people to really connect, so when you use a \$10 word where a \$.10 word will do, you don't improve your communication—you damage it.

Likewise, if you're writing about a technical subject, keep it at a level appropriate for your audience. You won't impress a group of laypeople just because you can write page after page of technobabble. Instead, they'll dismiss you as someone who doesn't understand them and their needs, and look for someone else. Even if you're not writing about technology, using specialized terms that only people in your industry know has the same effect. A better option is to explain how what you're doing affects the reader—without jargon that's only understood by specialists. Then you can tell readers that if they'd like to learn more about a particular topic they can access a more technical, insider-oriented explanation. Technical language has its place, but it should only be a part of standard customer communication if you know that your audience is composed of fellow industry insiders.



Share Your Story

Finally, **be personal**. If you're a sole proprietor or generally writing as yourself, feel free to share stories and examples from your own life that will help you connect with your customers. Not only are you sharing ideas, but you're demonstrating specific examples of where and how they apply—which can get readers thinking about how to connect your ideas with their own lives. It also puts a more human face on your business; you're not just a faceless company, but a real person.

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English: Why Didn't I Pay More Attention in High School?

Now, here's where you might be getting worried. Afraid of looking bad because of grammar and spelling mistakes? You're not alone. Perhaps you've seen the work of brigades of Sharpie-armed grammar police, correcting spelling, usage, and punctuation errors by businesses and government agencies. No one wants to be the next victim! But if you aren't thrilled about the idea of spending an extra \$100,000 on a new English degree, there are some more efficient alternatives.



When You Have a Grammar Question...

The first might seem obvious: pay attention to the **spelling and grammar checks** on your word processor! Those red and blue lines won't catch everything (especially when your error is using the wrong word or a word that sounds alike but spelled differently), and sometimes they'll see an error when there isn't one, but they'll at least give you a solid baseline to start from. A lot of errors could be caught just at this first step. If something gets flagged, take a close look: do you see a mistake yourself? If you're not certain that it's right, try rephrasing and changing things until you are certain (and hopefully, the checker likes it, too).

When it comes to spelling and word choice, **keep a dictionary handy** (or, better yet, just use any of the top online dictionaries: dictionary.com, Merriam-Webster.com, and others. There's no shame in doing a quick search to make sure you're spelling a word correctly (and using it properly, too)! You just might save yourself from a subtle sound-alike error like these ones:

- Affect & Effect
- Their, They're, & There
- Its & It's
- Accept & Except
- Your & You're
- Then & Than



Think Like a Reader

But what are you to do about errors that the checks don't catch? There are books going hundreds of pages detailing all the rules and exceptions to those rules in the English language. But a two-step process will help you correct a lot of mistakes. First, **read aloud** anything you've written for customers. Take your time; don't fly through this step. Make sure you're reading the actual words that are on the page—when you try to read too quickly, your brain starts automatically filling in the gaps with what it thinks (or knows) is supposed to be there, instead of what actually is. Slowly reading your messages aloud will catch a lot of mistakes and also help you point out places where, while your writing might be technically correct, it's very confusing and difficult for your readers to understand.

The second thing you ought to do is give your messages to a **second reader** before you send them out. Another person coming into the subject fresh is essentially a trial run for what your customers are going to think when they get your messages. You know what your message is supposed to say, but a fresh set of eyes can only read what's there, and has a better chance of noticing when something isn't quite right or doesn't make sense. And if your reader thinks something is wrong but you disagree, then just look it up and settle the question. The point here is not that your reader knows any better than you, but rather that he or she will read it differently, and hopefully notice things you don't (just like you would notice things in their writing that they don't see themselves).



Learning More

If you want to learn more about the technical side of writing, the first recommendation is the latest edition of *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk and EB White (and yes, that is the guy who wrote *Charlotte's Web*). Although the original edition is now almost 100 years old, the advice is timeless (and updated periodically where new issues arise). It's a concise (around 100 pages) list of rules and principles of good writing, from the fundamentals of sentence and paragraph structure to punctuation guides to specific word usage and common errors.

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As You Write

Writing might be more art than science, but anyone can learn the fundamentals of clear and strong written communication. With the right organization, voice, and language, business owners can create powerful, professional messages for customers, prospects, and partners alike.

Happy writing!

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