

The Guiding Write:  
How to Influence, Interest and Impact Your Reader  
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What does your writing say about you? Do your sentences sing? Do your verbs dance? Does your information flow?

We all read sales and business letters, memos and reports from associates around the world. Each is asking for our time, ideas or our interest in the company, product or service.

As many documents – e-mail included – as you receive, I can only imagine how many you read that contain typos, misspelled words or names, poor punctuation, or other glaring errors. What is your reaction: positive or negative? Your written words speak loudly.

The business world is in a mad frenzy to grab the prospects' attention and interest immediately. **Your opening is vital.**

You have about 10 seconds to captivate the attention and interest of your readers, and to stand out above your competition. In those first seconds the reader makes an initial judgment: to read, or not to read. They will ask, "What's in this for me? Why should I take the time to read this?" It takes only one uninteresting first sentence, a typo or an old, tired cliché to get the reader to ignore or become frustrated with your document.

We all have an incredible amount of information in our brains. It swirls around like water in a storm drain after a torrential downpour. Do you take for granted a "common knowledge" and assume – incorrectly – that the reader knows exactly what you're saying? Acronyms? Internal nuance? Jargon? *Include specifics* about you, your product or service to allow your readers to become more knowledgeable. Help your writings flow when you use more **S.O.A.P.:** Simplify, Organize, Address, Proof.

**Write for the reader.** Put yourself in the reader's position. Would you take the time to get past the first paragraph? Do you understand the purpose of the document? **Simplify** the information. When you simplify you carry the reader through your points with greater ease.

Can you shorten the document, slim it down to the bare facts and figures? Most likely. An average sentence is only 10-15 words long. Yes, you can have longer sentences, and yes, you can have shorter ones too. Use *strong verbs, active voice* and varied length sentences. Present your points with specific and fluid language. Delete unnecessary adverbs, vague expressions and redundancies: "very," "significant," "soon," "really," "end result," "true fact," and others.

Go back to something you've written this week and underline all the "to be" verbs you used: *is, was, were, are, has been, will be*, etc. Circle your strong verbs. Is there a balance? Can you replace some of the "to be" verbs with a stronger, more action-oriented verb?

**Compare:**

1. Our production *is up* this quarter. Visualize "up"? Up from what to where?
2. Our production *is better* than last quarter. Visualize "better"? Better than what?
3. Our production *increased by 15%* first quarter 2006. Visualize "increased" and the percentage? ("Increased" is a strong verb and the fact zeros in on your brain.)

Which sentence sends a specific and simplified message? #3. It's clear, factual and visual.

**Active voice** is more powerful, has fewer words and captivates your points better than passive voice.

Example: *Several updates for the new software were submitted by the IT department.* (Passive) The verb "to be" and the preposition "by" indicate passive voice. (Twelve words.)

**Or**

*The IT department specified several updates for the software.* (Active) The subject – IT department – acts and "specified" is the strong verb. (Nine words)

Simplify. Specify. Simplify.

A good letter is well **organized**. Outline the pertinent information you know the reader needs and wants. One way to organize is to *cluster* or *mind map* your information. If you have a major theme – **customer service outsourcing** – and you're writing about your company's service,

what would be the major points and their subpoints you'd want the reader to take away?

*The opening and closing are the two most important parts of the document.* Which of major points is the most important to you and/or your company? Begin there. *Save* the second most important point until the *end*. Why? We remember best what we *read first*, second best what we *read last!* Don't bury your second most important point in the second paragraph. Most readers skim the middle for tips and go to the end.

What do you want your readers to think, feel or do differently after they have read the document? Hook them in the opening, carry them through with facts and tools, and then end with a call-to-action or a "conclusion," that refers back to your opening. Your opening and closing are bookends. They hold everything together.

The readers want you to **address** their needs, wants, pain, or inquiry. Create invaluable word pictures that stand out in the readers' minds and include implementation, results and/or benefits. Remember that your knowledge base may not be theirs; therefore, address the points so they understand. Ask: Are my points clear? What will the reader take away from the document?

Does the reader understand who, what, where, when, why and how?

Extolling benefits, specifics and value, not generalities, fill up the readable page.

**Proofing** is the make or break law. If you don't take the time to proof before the document goes out, how will you take the time to correct the misunderstandings, misconceptions or missed opportunities?

Is your document 100% correct in grammar, spelling, dates, times, punctuation and syntax? It must be 100% error-free!

Have at least two other people proof your document. What one person questions, others will as well. It's tough to proof your own work; other sets of eyes help. If you don't have another person to help, print out your document and let it sit for a few minutes. Get your mind/brain off the words; look at another file, get a cup of coffee, make a phone call. Once you've gotten away from your words, your brain will see the mistakes. Another form of proofing is to read from the bottom to the

top – you don't get mired in the content, just the words – typos – and grammatical errors.

Give your phone numbers, address, hours, contact name(s), and price where applicable. Reread what you've written.

Proof, edit, reread. Proof – a second time – edit, reread. Proof – a third time – edit and reread.

Once you've pressed the "send" button your words carry themselves.

***Give Benefits. Be Specific. Create Value.***

Clean up your documents – especially e-mail – with **S.O.A.P.** (**S**implify, **O**rganize, **A**ddress, **P**roof). It makes writing and reading flow.

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