

Technical writing tips for nontechnical writers

In business, almost all writing is technical in nature and is written to be either persuasive or informative; perhaps both. Technical writers live in this world, and they develop a skill set over time that enables them to be very good at this sort of writing. But, people whose responsibility is in other areas of their organization, not focused on writing, may not be aware of these same writing tools. Yet, they still need to persuade and inform.

Following are a few techniques the average business writer can use to create documents or presentations that are more useful to a business audience.

For written documents:

- First, there is a well-known maxim that "less is more." Strive to use the fewest words possible to describe any topic.
- Favor short sentences and short paragraphs over complex constructions.
- Use simple words, rather than obscure words that don't really add to meaning.
- Break up text with liberal use of headings. If you can place headings in the margin to the left of the text, do so. It provides stronger visual cues as well as more white space on the page.
- If possible, include images or illustrations that illustrate the topic you're writing about. Don't use graphics merely for the sake of decoration.

For presentations:

- Don't use PowerPoint, just because you think you should. It's surprising how refreshing a simple white board or flip chart can be to an audience raised on PowerPoints. When you must use PowerPoint, provide effective illustrations, but go light on graphs and charts; make all graphic elements as simple as you can.
- Use only a few bullet points per page, and give your lecture from speaker's notes you have on paper, or that you can see on a laptop situated between you and the audience.
- When you present to an audience, concentrate on talking to them, not lecturing. Your PowerPoint should merely support your verbal presentation.
- Don't read your slides off the screen. Your audience can do that for themselves.

The key to effective business writing is to consider and respect your audience.

- Don't show off your education or intelligence.
- Use simple, descriptive, and declarative language.
- Focus on the content, not on how you present it.
- Concentrate on your goal: either inform your audience or persuade them. But don't bore them.

Following these simple rules will set your business writing apart from the average person in your organization and cause people to pay more attention to what you say. It's an odd fact that, by saying less, you will appear to know more.