

12 Tips for Effective Writing

by Joan D. Bennett

*Writing effectively can make you more successful at your job.
Follow these 12 tips to improve the effectiveness of your writing.*

THE Write Connection

As a writing consultant, editor, and public relations director, Joan Bennett has used effective writing to increase sales, expand readership, and improve communications.

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1. Know your audience.

When you write, you want your reader to do something: understand your point of view, take an action, buy something. Keep this person or group in mind as you write because your audience determines what you're going to say, how you're going to say it, and in what format you choose to say it. Amemo to your boss will be different from a letter to your mother.

2. Think, gather, plan, and write.

Begin the writing process with your purpose in mind. Ask, "What do I want the reader to do?" Allow yourself time to think before you write. Some great ideas may come to you while you're in the shower or driving the car. Then gather information, list major points, and formulate a plan. Careful planning now will save time later. If you're stuck, just start writing. Some writers discover their best ideas as they write. Just remember to keep your reader in mind as you write. Worry about editing later. Rewriting, rearranging ideas, cutting waste, and crafting sentences—keys to effective writing—are much easier once your ideas are on the page.

3. Choose a logical format and order.

Choose a format and order for your information that will attract and hold your reader's interest, suit the content, and work logically for your reader. Use transitional words to guide the reader through your copy.

4. Write as you speak.

Connect with your audience by using your own voice and simple, direct language. Avoid slang and clichés, and jettison the jargon of your industry, unless your audience craves it.

5. Make one point in each paragraph.

State your point, illustrate it with details, and get on to the next paragraph. Keep paragraphs short so the reader can process your information. Break major points into smaller parts and paragraphs if needed. Long paragraphs may make your reader's eyes glaze over. Zzzzzz.

6. Show, don't tell.

"Our company had a good year" tells the reader nothing. Use details, statistics, anecdotes, charts, and graphs to illustrate your points and to paint clear, vivid pictures in your reader's mind.

7. Keep ideas and phrasing parallel.

Readers sense something is wrong when writing isn't parallel and they focus on this, rather than focusing on your message.

Not parallel: *The committee voted for an increase in overtime wages, to select a new chairperson, and added year-end bonuses.*

Parallel: *The committee voted to increase overtime wages, to add year-end bonuses, and to select a new chairperson.*

8. Vary the rhythm.

Reading is like listening to music: the same monotonous rhythm makes us sleepy. When writing, vary sentence types and lengths. Some sentences can be long, melodious explanations that lead the reader through intricate, detailed scenarios. Other sentences are short.

9. Use the active voice.

The active voice reflects authority and action. In the active voice the subject performs the action:

The president presented the United Way award to John.

In the passive voice, the subject is acted upon:

The United Way award was presented to John by the president.

The verb *to be* (*was*) followed by the past tense of the verb (*presented*) sets up the passive voice.

Avoid this ineffective construction. Use it only when you don't know the person responsible:

The window was broken last night.

10. Write fat free.

Wordiness is not next to godliness. Be succinct.

Avoid phrases such as *it has been demonstrated by the study that, during the duration of this meeting, or we have come to understand that*. Your reader will be asleep before the end of the sentence. Get to the point.

Use *the study shows, during this meeting, or we understand* instead. Replace redundancies (*free gift, past history, final conclusion*) with clear writing (*gift, history, conclusion*).

Omit unnecessary words or phrases that don't add to your meaning.

11. Give it a rest.

Allow for time between the drafts of your writing, even if you have time only to make a phone call or to go to lunch. Try to build some "downtime" into your writing schedule so you come back to your writing with a new set of eyes.

12. Polish and proofread.

Spending time at this stage can increase the effectiveness of your writing, so make this an important part of your writing process. First, ask yourself if you have fulfilled your purpose for writing. Do your readers have a clear picture of what you want them to do? Have you anticipated and answered their questions? Check for missing information, add details that further illustrate your point, check your word choices and sentence structure, and evaluate your tone, rhythm, and organization. When you have said everything you intended to say, proofread for errors. Enlist a friend or colleague to give you feedback on what you have written and to look for errors that you may have missed. Make any final changes and then deliver your work to your audience for the true effectiveness test.

*Use these tips to develop
a winning plan for
writing effectively and easily
every time you write!*



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