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FOR DEVELOPING TALENT

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BUSINESS WRITING FOR MANAGERS

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MANAGEMENT

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More and more, the ability to communicate is on the short list of so-called soft skills that employers are hiring for. See, for example, the Monster.com article, “6 Soft Skills Everyone Needs and Employers Look For” and the CNBC article, “The Skills Employers Are Looking For.”

Managers don’t magically lose their need for communicating when they ascend a rung on the ladder. In fact, it’s especially important that managers be able to communicate, including in writing. Think about the strategic plans, memorandums, and detailed emails that managers write, just to name a few. A recent Association for Talent Development research report noted that communicating was the number-one skill that enabled managers to be successful in developing their direct reports.

The good news is that communication is a skill that can be developed. And the effort is well worth it. As Julie Peterson writes for Business.com, effective writing can boost your authority, make your ideas more convincing, and help you connect with your team.

In this issue of *TD at Work*, you will receive tips to help you:

- organize your thinking and structure your writing process
- write crisp, clear prose
- package your message
- influence your audience
- manage difficult conversations.

WRITING AS A PROCESS

It is important for managers to be able to write well. Their tone and whether they make their point will greatly affect their relationship with their direct reports. In writing to other managers or senior leaders, managers can—with good writing—maintain respectful relationships with peers even when there is disagreement. And managers can prove their leadership potential by balancing tact and directness when arguing their point.

No writer produces flawless prose without careful consideration. Effective writing evolves from a process, which even the best writers need. Given the frenetic pace of today’s workplace, the notion of a “process” might seem crazy, but the process doesn’t always need to be complex. A text message or a quick one-sentence email doesn’t require the same degree of thoughtful consideration as a longer communication or a formal message to a superior or to senior leadership.

Organizing Your Thinking

When you want to drive from point A to point B in an unfamiliar area, you don’t just start driving and figure it out as you go. Likewise, when you have multiple errands to run on Saturday morning, you usually don’t leave the house without deciding where to go. Instead, you write a list of things you need to do and where you need to go. You organize your thoughts.

Writing is no different. You can’t plunge into a writing task without a sense of where you are going.

To write clearly, you need to know what you want to say, and you won’t know that until you unload what is in your head. You might already know a couple of points you want to make, but the picture becomes much clearer when you brainstorm.

Here’s a good way to start: On paper or on the screen, list the topics you want to cover. If there are particular points you want to make about a topic, list those subtopics immediately below. Write out as many topics as you can think of without editing the list.

It’s essential to have a visual display of what you want to say so your brain will see what you’re thinking. Thoughts in your head are never in order. They bounce around like molecules, appearing and sometimes vanishing from your consciousness. For this reason, the topics on your list probably won’t be in a logical order. The computer screen or piece of paper mirrors what you are thinking, enabling you to notice what is missing, what is not important, what is out of order, and what you now realize you don’t want to include.

You might need to do the brainstorming exercise more than once. Do it early to get started. After doing research to gather the information you need, you might want to do it again. The topics and your thinking around them will look different with the additional information.

Drafting

After brainstorming and organizing your thinking, the next step is drafting. And it is just that—a draft.

Many people sit for extended periods staring at a blank screen, apparently hoping that glittering prose will suddenly appear. What they are doing, without realizing it, is trying to write a message in their head and then transfer it to the screen. Good writing rarely happens that way.

Instead, start with a few words—even if they seem only marginally related—and see how quickly your thinking unfolds and your ideas take shape on the screen. Because your brain thinks by association, the words you have put down will trigger related thoughts. Soon you are stringing

together a few sentences, which then become paragraphs.

Writing is a process of discovery, as writing coach Don Murray often said. By putting words on the screen, you discover what you want to say. You clarify and sharpen your thinking once you see what those ideas look like on a page.

Don't stifle your effort at this stage by repeatedly interrupting yourself to "fix" things. This often happens because, through your peripheral vision, you see something you just wrote and are questioning it: Is it a typo? Should that punctuation be different? Is that really the right word? You want to go back and change it, but now is not the time for that.

Perhaps you are not comfortable writing the next paragraph until preceding paragraphs are exactly as you want them. So you keep stopping and going back to polish the previous paragraph. But those sentences and paragraphs might get deleted in the editing process, so all the time you spent tweaking them was wasted. Save the fine-tuning for later.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION FOR MANAGERS

According to the Association for Talent Development Research report, *ACCEL: The Skills That Make a Winning Manager*, communication is a top skill that contributes to managers' success at developing direct reports.

For the purpose of the report, communication was defined as "the exchange of information and feedback between managers and their direct reports. Communication also involves a willingness to engage in three types of conversations with employees: disciplinary, coaching, and praise. ... At the individual level, effective communication—including targeted, actionable feedback—can build awareness and action toward better employee performance."

In response to the question "In your organization, to what extent do the following skills enable managers to be successful in developing their direct reports?" respondents selected "high" or "very high" extent for these skills:

Communication	88%
Listening and Assessing	82%
Accountability	80%
Engagement	75%
Collaboration	66%

The report, sponsored by the Columbia Business School, found that a relatively low percentage of managers actually demonstrated the skills listed above. Respondents said that only 29 percent of managers in their organization actually exhibited the skill of communication when working with their direct reports.

Revising

This is where you do the fine-tuning to make your message a solid piece of writing. For important writing tasks—those that aren't quick texts or tweets—you need to leave sufficient time for rewriting.

Avoid the One-and-Done Mentality

Because we are a culture in overdrive, we don't view our initial version as a draft. We race through it, run it through spell check, and can't wait to hit send. The first “draft” ends up being the final draft.

Don't dismiss the significance of the rewriting phase. Some writers assume that good writing is about content, so as long as they have ample information that is reasonably well written, their job is finished.

Confirm That Your Message Is Clear

What you poured onto the screen when creating your draft might not be presented the way it should be, and you may not have expressed yourself in the way you wanted. Don't assume that just because the information is in there somewhere that the reader will find it. It's not the reader's job to search, and people who are forced to do so become frustrated and often will leave your communication unread.

The rewriting and refining stage is the part of the writing process where you make your writing readable by removing the bumps and blemishes that readers will notice most easily. Now is the time for the shaping, trimming, and fine-tuning that will give your communication the professional look that is critical to business writing.

As you look at what is on the screen, you may discover new thoughts and new ways of thinking. And perhaps you will discover that what you wrote is not what you want to say after all.

Examine Your Writing for Clarity, Economy of Language, and Tone

Little things matter. Word choice, sentence structure, and punctuation affect clarity. Extra words add clutter that obscure your important ideas.

This is a good time to ask a colleague to read your draft. Others are apt to see flaws that, once corrected, will give you a more polished draft.

You not only avoid embarrassment but also learn something new.

WRITING CRISP, CLEAR PROSE

As mentioned above, if readers have to dig deep to find your intended message, you frequently will lose them—or at least they won't get to the important part of the message as soon as they should.

These tips will help you communicate effectively by using crisp, clear language.

Use a Direct, Simplified Structure

A reader must know the subject and the verb for any sentence to make sense. Keeping those elements reasonably close to the front will make it easier to grasp the main idea. Consider which paragraph below is easier to digest.

Original

Our company, having maintained a presence in the country for 10 years and offering extensive experience in China, including doing focus group research, conducting training sessions, and consulting with business leaders in various industries, plans to bid on the project.

Revised

Our company plans to bid on the project, given that we have had a presence in the country for 10 years and have extensive experience in China. We conducted focus group research, presented training sessions, and consulted with business leaders in various industries.

The original sentence presents a significant problem for the reader: When the brain sees the word *company*, it knows the subject and now is in a hurry to find the verb. By the time it finally sees the word *plans*, the brain has forgotten what it just read and has to reread the sentence.

Convert Nouns to Verbs

Verbs energize a sentence and make it come alive, yet we often hide them. Part of this may be

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