

# Writing on the Job: What's Talent Got to Do With It?

by Karen Wormald (Originally published in *Credit Union Business*, "BizCom 101," July 2006)

When most of us were first faced with writing something at work, our only expertise came from high school English lessons and margin notes teachers scribbled on our term papers and essays.

Remember all those crazy grammar rules that were supposed to be chiseled in stone? Here are some doozies I learned:

- Never end a sentence with a preposition.
- Never split an infinitive.
- Never begin a sentence with *And* or *But*.
- Make every sentence have a subject and a predicate.

And then there was sentence diagramming. Out in the "real" world, have you ever seen anyone do that? I've been writing professionally for several decades, but I couldn't diagram a sentence under threat of torture. Luckily, I never have to. Nor do you.

My point is that academic writing is vastly different from business writing.

But for some reason, the nutty rules keep on coming. Otherwise sensible business people embrace ideas such as:

- To sound more important, always refer to yourself as *myself*, never *I* or *me*.
- Legalese—*aforementioned*, *heretofore*, and *inasmuch*—is a good thing.
- It's not wise to be too direct. Long sentences, passive voice, and pronouns keep everyone from knowing exactly who's responsible for what.

## Typing vs. Writing

As a freelance writing consultant, I've met people in many industries in companies large and small. A lot of them confuse typing with writing, which tends to make their output painful to read. They obviously don't realize the consequences of murky, ugly writing to the bottom line.

If you're in the habit of pounding out words and pressing "Send" without giving them a second glance, you may not realize how a sloppy, disorganized writing style can negatively reflect on you as a professional. Colleagues may be used to receiving muddled messages, but if any of this stuff goes out to the public, your credibility, intelligence, and integrity might well be questioned.

It's definitely not the way to attract new customers.

If you write anything for public consumption, rest assured that no amount of slick graphic design will

improve bad writing. And businesses should never waste money reproducing bad writing in large quantities on glossy paper. But many of them do. Particularly in financial services.

## What Type of Writer are You?

Basically, I've met three types of business writers:

The largest group consists of those who freely acknowledge they're not good writers. They dread the chore and will do anything to avoid it. Fortunately, they can be helped because the first step in solving any problem is admitting it exists.

A smaller group consists of people who did well in English and now think they channel Shakespeare. They tend to be verbose, and they're easily identified by the fit they throw if anyone dares to edit their work. These writers believe they already know it all, so the rest of us just have to tolerate them.

The smallest group actually writes well, and these people usually speak well. They're flexible about using "proper English." Having a message that's clear, logical, and easy to read is their main priority.

## What's Talent Got to Do With It?

To answer the question I posed in the title, I must say, "Not much." Anyone can be a competent business writer. After all, it's not like you need to dream up great plots and unforgettable characters.

If you're open to improving your writing, here's where you'll find hints to use and share to promote better communication. Grammar will make cameo appearances. We'll explore other tools instead, including your word processing software's features. You don't need perfect grammar to get readers' attention.

Any endeavor like this is bound to attract grammar snobs. If you're already itching to bust my gerunds by pouncing on perceived usage errors, please save your keystrokes. You'll never make me remember what a predicate nominatives is.

Our goal isn't to learn "proper" English. Our goal is to write clearly, concisely, and conversationally with the least time and effort.

Next, we'll tackle how to organize and give your ideas the best shot at getting read. As we go, I welcome your suggestions, questions, and examples. But no grammar lessons, please.