Writing for Others

A Guide to More Effective Business Writing for Anyone Who Writes Anything Other People Will Read

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Introduction

Writing skills are critical in today's businesses

Writing is central to the modern workplace. In a typical month as a management consultant, I sent about 500 emails, received 1,500 more, and worked on more than 200 draft versions of PowerPoint documents. And while not everyone in an office environment needs to know how to code or analyze data, almost all will be asked at some point to draft a presentation or send an email to a large audience.

Business writing has unique challenges

Yet many businesspeople have no training in how to write for business. In fact, most probably rely on their experience writing essays in high school or college – which can actually make their business writing less effective.

For example, most high school and college papers have a minimum length requirement, which means students stretch out their points into long, winding paragraphs. These assignments also have strict requirements that force students to format every document in the same way, and prohibit the use of bullet points or bold type.

Habits like these, formed through years of repetition, can easily carry forward into the workplace. But they are counterproductive to good business writing, which is entirely different from writing an essay for school.

I was inspired to write this book to pass along some of what I've learned and some of the mistakes I've made myself or seen others make. I hope it will help you think more critically about the way you write, and ultimately become a more effective business writer.

Empathy for the reader is what matters

If there is only one thing you take away from this book, it should be this: **good business writing is written with empathy for the reader**. In other words, **you should be writing with others in mind, not just writing whatever is easiest for you**. (I've put those points in bold because they are so important.)

It's easy to write lazily by typing whatever comes to mind first and sending it off without a second look. But the reader isn't in your mind, so whatever you've written may not make

as much sense to them as it does to you. At best, this might make it harder for readers to grasp your point; at worst, it can lead to confusion and miscommunication.

Have you ever read a long, confusing email, and at the end realized you had no idea what it was really saying? I have. Going back to the top of the page to read through again is a sinking feeling, to say nothing of the time it wastes.

The goal when writing should be to make sure your readers never get confused or feel like they are wasting time. Instead, we should strive to make the reader's job as easy as possible.

Three choices to add empathy to your writing

This book will detail three choices you can make to write more effectively by shifting your focus to the reader. They are:

1) **Be concise**: be clear, without using more words than you need

2) **Use formatting**: visually highlight important points

3) **Prioritize what matters**: put your important messages near the beginning

These three choices can be found in the best practices used in technical writing, where clarity in communication is the most important goal. They're also present in the training used in top management consultancies, and in books like The Pyramid Principle, which outlines a specific method for communicating effectively in the workplace.

The three choices above can be applied across all different kinds of writing. The following sections will give examples of how to use these rules in emails and presentations, the most common forms of writing in most businesses. But these choices could be applied to other things, too: technical documentation, memos, brochures, white papers, and more.

In fact, I've tried to make this book itself an example of how to apply these three choices. As you read, you may notice that some things about this book — like its short length and larger font size — echo the advice given within.

Good writing is a choice

I have referred to the three items above as "choices" for a reason. Clear, effective writing is a choice we have to make. Sometimes, it might not feel necessary, and indeed sometimes it probably isn't. (When you send a text do your friend, do you need to choose your words as carefully as when you are sending an email to your boss?)

The goal of this book is to demonstrate the power of writing with the reader in mind, and to offer some tools that can help you put this into practice. Ultimately, it's up to you to decide when and how to apply these methods.

Use this book however you like

The next sections of this book will go into detail on each of the three choices, discussing specific strategies for applying each of them. Each strategy also has examples of how it can be used effectively when writing both emails and presentations.

Feel free to focus only on the examples if you like, or you can read through all of the discussion about each choice. You could skip around, or only read the sections you're interested in. In general, use the material here however it's most convenient for you. Because above all, the book is meant to help you.

Be concise

"I have made this letter longer

than usual, because I have not

had time to make it shorter."

-Blaise Pascal

In this section, we'll discuss the first choice – "be concise" – and go into more detail on three sub-strategies you can use to help implement it into your writing. After that, we'll get into some examples to show how being concise can improve your writing in real-world contexts, such as emails and presentations. But first, we need to examine what it means to be concise, and why it is so important.

Why be concise?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines 'concise' as 'brief and clear'. These are two critical traits of effective writing in the workplace.

According to a Carleton University study[1], the average Canadian office-worker spends 17 hours every week reading and answering emails. Imagine if we could cut that in half – we'd have an extra 8.5 hours per week of productive time for each worker. For someone working a standard 40-hour week, that's an entire day's worth of time.

How could we achieve this? Sending fewer emails could certainly help. But so would rewriting all of our emails to be only half as long.

Often, our first instinct when writing a message to someone else is to pour our thoughts out onto the page without bothering to organize them. This urge is even more tempting when using an easy-to-send format like an email. Writing something 'off the top of your head' is the fastest way to get an idea out and sent off to the recipient, and it keeps the time spent editing to zero.

On the other hand, writing concise statements takes thought and attention. I find that if I review something I have written, I can almost always remove at least a few words to make it shorter, or revise a sentence to clarify my point – but it takes a little extra effort.

While it is tempting to try and save on that effort by ignoring the editing process and sending longer messages, there are at least two good reasons to spend the effort on writing more concisely:

1) It will save time for your readers, and

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[1]https://newsroom.carleton.ca/archives/2017/04/20/carleton-study-finds-people-spending-third-job-time-email/

2) It will increase the likelihood that others will read and understand the message you are writing.

The first point shouldn't be understated – everyone's time is valuable, and we should strive to protect it. In addition, most people will appreciate someone who doesn't waste their time. But it's the second point that is most meaningful, since writing long, unwieldy passages makes it much more likely that your audience will tune you out.

Have you ever opened a dense email with several long paragraphs, only to close out of it before you've finished reading? Or have you seen PowerPoint slides filed with text in small font, packed with buzzwords like 'leverage' and 'synergy'? How tempting was it to zone out and daydream, instead of puzzling through to figure out the intended message?

These kinds of attention lapses happen every day all over the world, and shorter, clearer writing helps prevent them. That's why conciseness is so important.

One final thought – you will notice that this book is quite short. In a standard print format, with regular font size and spacing, it would only take up 50 or 60 pages. I could have easily filled up an extra 100-200 pages by restating my points in different ways, or by adding long-winded stories about the workplace, or with any number of other strategies. And indeed, there are many business books that stretch to that length and beyond.

But I knew I only had 60 pages' worth of things to say, so writing more would have done nothing but waste your time. And besides, how many fewer people would bother to finish a book that was three times as long? Writing a shorter book was one way for me to try and ensure readers could connect with my message.

Three strategies for conciseness

It can be daunting to try to take words out of a long phrase – often each word will feel necessary. Here are three strategies to help you write more concisely:

1A: Don't over-qualify your statements

1B: Choose your words carefully

1C: Avoid jargon

This section will cover each of these strategies in turn, and discuss how they can be implemented in emails, presentations, and other common forms of writing.

1A. Avoid 'over-qualifying' your statements

Sometimes, we aren't confident in what we have to say. When this happens, our instinct is to hedge by adding qualifying words. For example, might say we "just need a little more time" or that something "likely won't really be a very big deal."

Words like 'just', 'little', 'likely', and 'very' weaken the message in our writing. These qualifying words can make us feel better because they take the force out of our statements. Many people are afraid to 'over-promise' and then fail to deliver later on — using these words can make them feel like they haven't committed to anything.

But that same hesitation means the message doesn't come through as strongly as it could. And these qualifying words add a lot of filler to sentences, making the reader invest more time to get to the point.

In general, it's best to leave these qualifiers out of your writing. This makes your writing shorter and also more decisive. Readers will be grateful: not only will they have less to read, but the message will be easier to understand.

Occasionally, it may be important to qualify what you are saying - for example, if you don't know the answer to a question, and you're giving an educated guess or estimate. But in everyday use, over-qualifying your writing will do nothing but sap the power from your message and bloat your sentences with filler. It's best to avoid these qualifying words whenever possible.

The next section will give examples of how to avoid over-qualifying in emails and presentations.

1A. Example: Over-qualifying makes emails wordy and vague

Take this email as an example:

Hi Beth, hope you're doing well!

Just wanted to send along the latest rough draft of the document for our meeting this Friday – it's still in progress, but it would be really helpful to get your thoughts. Please read through if you have the time – I know you are pretty busy. Any comments or feedback you have would be much appreciated.

Best,

Jacob

This email might seem brief and clear, since it's only five lines long. But look closer, and you will find several qualifiers – words like "just", "rough", "really," "if", "pretty", and "much" that are almost never needed. These words not only add unnecessary filler, they significantly weaken the email's message.

In addition, the example given above is not as clear as it seems. The only message is to ask for feedback on the document, which isn't specific. What kind of feedback does Jacob want, and on which parts of the document? A message like this is easy to ignore, because it does not clearly identify what the reader should do.

Finally, by writing in this way, we're not being very kind to our readers. This email still isn't very long, but imagine waffling like this over several paragraphs. Forcing readers to sift through a lot of fluffy language isn't a thoughtful way to communicate.

Now, consider this revised version:

Hi Beth,

Please see attached for the latest draft of the document for Friday. Any feedback would be appreciated – particularly on the chart on page 4, and the messaging in section B.

Best,

Jacob

The second version is only 34 words, compared to 63 for the first version – meaning it only takes about half as long to read. Yet because it doesn't have any unnecessary qualifiers, there was still plenty of room to add a more specific request. Even though the second message is shorter, it is also clearer – overall, it is much more concise.

1A. Example: Using data in presentations eliminates the need for qualifiers

The same concept applies to presentations. Consider the following list of bullets which might appear on a PowerPoint slide:

Overview of ACME's performance

- ACME Corp's revenues have been fairly steady over the last few years, not quite increasing along with the slightly bullish market

- In addition, profits have been decreasing slightly, due to some small cost increases in marketing and the supply chain

- As a result, many investors are getting somewhat nervous, and a few have downgraded their ratings of ACME's stock

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Having read through the last section, you should be quick to pick up on the qualifiers littered throughout these bullets. It would be easy to remove them – and we would be left with something like this:

Overview of ACME's performance

- ACME's revenues have been steady, despite a bullish market

- In addition, profits have decreased, due to cost increases in marketing and the supply chain

- As a result, some investors have downgraded their ratings of ACME's stock

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These changes certainly save a lot of words (21), and strengthen the message we are conveying to the audience. But there is one concern – we've lost the nuance of the original slide. Reading the first set of bullets tells us that while things aren't great, they're also not

too bad. Reading the second slide might make ACME employees start looking for a new job.

Introducing specific data points will help reduce qualifiers while giving an even more precise picture. Consider this third revision:

Overview of ACME's performance

- ACME Corp's revenues are up 1% since 2014, compared to 4% market growth

- Profits are down 4% since 2014, due to a 3% increase in marketing cost and 2% increase in supply chain cost

- As a result, some investors have downgraded their ratings of ACME's stock

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This is still much shorter than the original slide. But now hard facts have replaced all of the qualifiers. There's no need to make a judgement call about whether 4% is a 'slight', 'moderate', or 'significant' decline – the audience can decide for themselves. And including that exact percentage means nobody will be left guessing.

Using data in this way is effective in all kinds of writing. Not only will it help you be as specific as possible, but it creates a better experience for the reader. They won't be left with follow-up questions such as "what do you mean when you say revenues have been 'fairly steady'?" Including more facts is a great way to make your writing clearer and to write with others in mind.

1B. Choose your words carefully and keep them consistent

Often in business, different people will have different definitions for similar words. This can be especially true in areas such as IT, where a word may have a specific meaning, and can't be replaced with other words.

To avoid this kind of confusion, it is important to think carefully about which words we use, and then stay consistent in using those words.

For example, if the CEO has been discussing her 'Transformative Goals' for the business, and has used that language repeatedly, it's not a good idea not to refer to them as something else, like 'transformative priorities' or 'major goals'. If we change the wording, it may not be clear whether these are the same goals the CEO had mentioned or something different.

Similarly, if someone in IT is asking about 'requirements', it's not helpful to change the wording and refer to them as 'necessities' or 'requests', since the word 'requirements' carries a specific meaning within IT departments.

The following sections will look at examples of how choosing your words carefully can ensure your message is clear.

1B. Example: Use exact language in emails when possible

Imagine that James receives an email from someone he knows in IT, Melanie:

James,

I heard in our staff meeting today that we're going to be starting a new project called Project Barracuda to develop a new internal system for your group. Is that right? As I understand it, this is different from Project Armadillo which is already under way.

Have you started to draft the requirements and a project timeline? If so, could you send over the latest you have? Otherwise, if you could send me a first draft by Friday, that would be great. We want to start planning on our side as soon as possible.

Kind regards,

Melanie

James hasn't started on requirements or a timeline, but he wants to check and see if anyone else on the team already has. So, he decides to send an email to his boss, Shivani:

Hi Shivani,

Do you know if anyone has started documentation for the new internal system project? Melanie in IT is asking for the latest - her group wants to see a draft of what will be needed for the project and what our expected rollout schedule looks like. I'm happy to take the lead on putting a draft together, but I wanted to double-check that nobody else had already started working on it.

Best,

James

This email is fairly brief, and on its face it might seem clear. But James has introduced a lot of potential uncertainty by changing some of the words Melanie used. By not specifying which project he's referring to, he might create confusion. And by replacing

important words like "requirements" and "project timeline", he's made it more likely that Shivani might interpret the request in a different way from how Melanie had meant it.

A better message might look like this:

Hi Shivani,

Do you know if anyone has started documentation for Project Barracuda? Melanie in IT is asking for a draft version of the requirements and project timeline - see her note below.

I'm happy to take the lead on putting a draft together if nobody else has already started working on one.

Best,

James

Begin forwarded message: … [Melanie's original message]

By using language that is as specific as possible, and the exact same words as Melanie used, James can eliminate the potential for confusion. And forwarding Melanie's message along is even better - this lets Shivani see exactly what the request was for herself.

It's easy for a message to get mixed up when it's passed between several people. Choosing your words carefully like this can help avoid a lot of confusion.

1B. Example: Choose your words carefully in presentations to stay consistent

Choosing words carefully is also important in presentations, where it is critical to be as clear as possible for your audience. Being specific with your word choice can avoid confusion and make it easier for the audience to follow along.

Let's imagine the leadership of a company has developed "Four Priorities" for the year:

1) Lower overhead costs

2) Higher margin on core products

3) Expansion into the European market

4) Improved customer satisfaction

The CEO asks for a presentation that will help roll out the Four Priorities to the entire company. Here are a couple of example slides:

We will be focusing on Four Priorities this year

▪ The Four Priorities are:

    1) Lower overhead costs

    2) Higher margin on core products

    3) Expansion into Europe

    4) Improved customer satisfaction

▪ All four will be measured in a combined 'scorecard' to track our performance

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How you can help

- There are many ways you can help with these important initiatives:

  - **Reducing costs:** enter orders in the system as soon as they are confirmed to cut down on the need for rush shipping
  - **Raising prices:** sell at full list price to new customers whenever possible
  - **Growing in Europe:** prioritize any new bids from European customers
  - **Better customer experience:** ask your customers how we're doing and how we can serve them even better

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You might notice that the wording on the second slide doesn't match the first slide, even though they're both covering the same Four Priorities. Even though both slides are individually concise, the different wording means they don't feel connected. The audience may not walk away with as clear of a picture of the Four Priorities as they could.

Instead, consider this alternate version of the second slide:

How you can help with the Four Priorities

- There are many ways you can help with our Four Priorities:

  - **1) Lower overhead costs:** enter orders in the system as soon as they are confirmed to cut down on the need for rush shipping
  - **2) Higher margin on core products:** sell at full list price to new customers whenever possible
  - **3) Expansion into Europe:** prioritize any new bids from European customers
  - **4) Improved customer satisfaction:** ask your customers how we're doing and how we can serve them even better

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Here the wording has been chosen to be consistent with the first slide. Even though nothing else on the slide has changed, the new wording helps reinforce the core message for the audience. It also makes the presentation easier to follow from one slide to the next by using the exact same phrasing to refer to the same concepts.

This is just one example of how choosing your words carefully can make a big impact. It's helpful to remember this whenever you are dealing with a topic that many of your readers are familiar with - the more you can stick to wording they have already seen, the easier it will be for them to pick up on your message.

1C. Avoid jargon

If you've worked in a business environment, you've likely encountered jargon. There are two kinds of jargon, both of which make writing harder to understand:

• Buzzwords

• Technical jargon

The first kind of jargon, 'buzzwords', consists of words that catch on as trendy concepts across all kinds of businesses. Examples of these include 'synergy', 'leverage', and 'utilize' – words which are generally unnecessary, or can be replaced with shorter and clearer language. There are many phrases which fall into this category as well, like 'boiling the ocean' or '30,000-foot view.' Again, these phrases can be easily replaced with much simpler words.

The second kind of jargon consists of technical words that apply to only one specific industry or company. This includes engineering-level specifics, most acronyms, and any company- or industry-specific terms – anything an outsider wouldn't understand on their first read should be considered jargon.

All kinds of jargon should be avoided whenever possible. Buzzwords can frequently be replaced with much shorter, clearer words – for instance, try replacing 'leverage' and 'utilize' with 'use'. And technical or company-specific jargon might save time if you are working with only a specific group of people, but you never know when your presentations, memos, or list of requirements will be shared with someone from another department or another company who doesn't know your jargon.

The following examples will help illustrate how avoiding jargon can help make your writing more concise.

1C. Example: Avoiding jargon in emails eliminates confusion

Buzzwords should not be used in email. They are meant to make language sound better, generally for a large audience. But most of the time, email is written in a more conversational tone. There's no need to tell your coworkers that they can "leverage synergies" with another department - instead, you can just tell them to "work together". Removing buzzwords will make your emails shorter, simpler, and easier to read.

However, sometimes it is necessary to use technical jargon in email—for instance, if you are discussing specific details of a project with someone.

Here are three things to keep in mind:

• If you're writing to someone who works at your company, you may be able to use a lot of technical jargon without issue—but think twice if you're writing to an outsider

• If you use an acronym, and you think there's any chance the other person doesn't know what it stands for, you should define it in parentheses the first time you use it

• It can be helpful to use specific names or identifiers instead of broader technical language (e.g.: part id # J83E610 instead of "rudder flange")

As an example, let's imagine that Roy needs to send an email to a customer who's upset that their widget isn't compatible with their system.

Hi Steven,

Thanks for your email. I'm sorry that our product isn't working for you, and I want to do whatever it takes to make this better.

It sounds like the blade contacts may not be properly linking to the DTR. Does your system have an ERC? That could be the culprit—if so, I can send you an ERC-compatible replacement widget at no charge.

Regards,

Roy

If Steven isn't an expert on these kinds of products, this email will make no sense at all. Roy hasn't made any effort to define or simplify his technical jargon. He certainly doesn't seem to have written this message with Steven in mind. Instead, he seems to have written it based only on how he thinks about these kinds of issues.

Now take a look at this edited version:

Hi Steven,

Thanks for your email. I'm sorry that our product isn't working for you, and I want to do whatever it takes to make this better.

It sounds like the blade contacts (the two small bumps on the front) may not be properly linking to the Diode Transmission Receiver (DTR). Do you know if your system has an electricity-resistant coating? That could be the culprit. If so, I can send you a replacement DTR at no charge. If you're not sure, I can send a technician to come take a look for you.

Regards,

Roy

This is better - even though there are still a lot of confusing technical terms, Roy takes the time to explain them and avoids using acronyms. If Steve knows all the jargon, he'll still be able to understand this message. And if he doesn't, this email will be much easier to understand.

1C. Example: Avoiding jargon in presentations makes them easier to read

It's common to find jargon, especially buzzwords, in presentations. Perhaps people want to dress up their language for an audience. However, this almost always ends up doing more harm than good, as these buzzwords usually make the slides longer and harder to understand.

Consider this example slide:

Leveraging additional third-party human capital could help improve key metrics for customer service response times

- Utilizing a large service such as TempCo would reduce costs while providing day-one impact

- Leveraging a smaller, niche agency such as GreenTemps would be more costly, but could add more long-horizon value

- There are several key factors to consider:
    - The level of outsourcing/offshoring we are comfortable with
    - How much cost we want to eliminate
    - Whether we are willing to sacrifice service quality for faster response times

This example is exaggerated, but you probably find it hard to understand exactly what the slide is saying. There are a ton of buzzwords here, and almost all of them can be eliminated or replaced with shorter, simpler words. An audience could easily lose interest in this slide. In that case, why bother to have a slide at all?

Here's an example of how this slide could be made more concise by removing the buzzwords:

Hiring more contractors could help improve our customer service response times

- Using a large service such as TempCo would lower costs and provide help sooner

- Hiring a smaller, niche agency (such as GreenTemps) would be more costly, but would likely provide higher-quality service

- There are several trade-offs to consider:
  - The level of outsourcing/offshoring we are comfortable with
  - How much cost we want to eliminate
  - Whether we are willing to sacrifice service quality for faster response times

This slide carries the exact same message, but is much more concise. Many words or phrases have been replaced with shorter, clearer language, and some words, like "key", have been eliminated entirely. (The word "key" is almost never necessary, unless you're talking about unlocking doors.)

Remember — it's not a bad thing to use short words. If something is written concisely, and the point is clearly made, a reader won't wish that it had been written with a lot of jargon instead. But the opposite is often true.

Recap: Be concise

Writing more concisely will save time for your readers and also help ensure they understand your message.

This first section discussed three strategies for conciseness:

1A: Don't over-qualify your statements—avoid words like 'just', 'fairly', or 'very'

1B: Choose your words carefully—use exact language whenever possible

1C: Avoid jargon—don't use buzzwords, and save technical jargon for when it's useful

Writing concisely isn't always easy. It takes concentration to pick the right words—and to avoid using too many. This effort pays off in increased understanding from your readers.

One last thought: sometimes, writing concisely can strip some of the personality from your writing. This usually doesn't matter much, but it might for some messages—especially when writing about sensitive topics, or when communicating with people you don't know very well.

In general, it's important to remember that it's harder to build relationships over email than in person. Working with someone who you only interact with via chat and email makes it difficult to build a human understanding. It's always a good idea to check in not only over email, but also in person or over the phone. That way, both parties are reminded of the human on the other end of the exchange.

Use formatting

"Form follows function - that has been misunderstood. Form and function should be one, joined in a spiritual union."

-Frank Lloyd Wright

In this section, we'll discuss the second choice for more empathetic writing – "use formatting" – and go into more detail on three strategies you can use to help implement it into your writing. After that, we'll get into some examples to show how formatting changes can improve your writing in real-world contexts, such as emails and presentations.

But first, we'll examine why formatting can improve your writing, even without changing any of the words.

Why use formatting?

Formatting can be a powerful tool to help readers understand what we are writing. Too much formatting can be distracting, of course - adding different colors and fonts to a single block of text will make it much harder to read. But subtle changes, such as increasing font size, spacing out text, and bolding important phrases, can improve comprehension substantially.

These concepts are already integrated into our society. Many people who struggle to read small, densely-packed text use reading glasses to help make the words and easier to understand. Most teachers and professors request written assignments to be turned in double-spaced. And advertisers know that big and bold text is attention-grabbing, so they use it on billboards and in TV commercials.

But what's surprising is that these ideas seem to be rarely used in the business world. The default setting in most email clients is for small font packed into single-spaced lines. I have seen far too many PowerPoint presentations where paragraphs of text are crammed onto the slide in font size 12 or 14, making it almost impossible for the audience to read what is on the slide. And rarely are important points highlighted in any way - instead, they are rendered in the same type as everything around them.

Fortunately, it's simple to change formatting, as long as we stay focused on trying to make our messages easy to read. Before you send off a memo, a long email, or a text-heavy presentation, take a few moments to look at it from the recipient's point of view. Ask yourself: would this be easy to read? Would I want to read it? Or does it look like I might find

it hard to pay attention? That's where formatting can be most effective — to draw the reader in and help them understand what's on the page.

<u>Three strategies for using formatting</u>

Here are three suggestions for how to use formatting to help your readers understand your message:

2A. Use bullets or numbers when making lists

2B. Avoid long, dense paragraphs

2C. Bold your most important messages

Once again, this section will cover each of these strategies, and give examples of how they can be used effectively in emails and presentations.

2A. Use bullets or numbers when making lists

Lists come up often in business writing. They could be lists of options for someone to choose from, questions for someone to answer, data (like a list of employees attending a meeting), insights from an analysis, or anything else.

However, lists can be hard to read. They create long run-on sentences that fill the whole page with words. Plus, it can be hard for the reader to remember items from the start of a list when it's written out in a sentence.

Technical writers use bullets or numbering for lists to prevent these exact issues. Bullets create additional space by giving each item of a list its own line, making the whole thing easier to read and review. And if there is a sequential list, like steps in a process, numbering them makes the order crystal-clear.

As an example, take the list that was given in the first paragraph of this section. It might not seem like a list because of how it is presented, but any set of several items separated by commas can clog up the page. My list from the first paragraph could be reformatted with bullets like this:

- Options for someone to choose from
- Questions for someone to answer
- Data (like a list of employees attending a meeting)
- Insights from an analysis
- Anything else

Formatting with bullets makes it much easier to read and understand each item in the list. This is a simple and powerful tool which can improve the clarity of all kinds of writing.

The following sections will give examples of how to effectively use bullets and numbers in emails and presentations.

2A. Example: Use bullets and numbers in emails to help readers respond

Take the email below as an example:

Hi Johnson,

I have a few questions for you about the staff meeting on Friday. Who will be attending? What topics will we be covering? Do you have an agenda you could share with me? Did you get all the data you needed from our team? Is there anything else I need to do to prepare for the meeting?

Best,

Liz

This message uses the first choice ("be concise") well, as the message is both short and clear. But the formatting leaves something to be desired. It would be easy for Johnson to miss one of the questions Liz asked. This style may also give the reader the impression that the questions are coming rapid-fire, one after the other.

Now consider the edited version below:

Hi Johnson,

I have some questions for you about the meeting on Friday:

1) Who will be attending?

2) What topics will we be covering?

3) Do you have an agenda you could share with me?

4) Did you get all the data you needed form our team?

5) Is there anything else I need to do to prepare for the meeting?

Best,

Liz

Putting the questions in a numbered list makes it easier for Johnson to read all the questions. It also makes it easier for him to reply clearly – he can number his replies, or put his answers directly in the text of Liz's email, options that he didn't have with the first version of the email. Overall, this simple formatting change will help Johnson understand the questions and reply with useful answers.

2A. Example: Use numbering to give presentations structure

Bullets and numbers are already commonly used in presentations. However, numbering your points can be even more powerful when done correctly.

Let's take the following two slides as an example:

Overview of heart attack warning signs

- Heart attacks occur when the blood flow that brings oxygen to the heart muscle is severely reduced or cut off completely

- This happens when the arteries that supply oxygen to the heart become narrow from a buildup of plaque - fat, cholesterol, and other substances

- Each minute without treatment decreases the likelihood of surviving without disability

- Today, we will discuss several heart attack warning signs:
  - Pain or discomfort in the chest
  - Lightheadedness, nausea, or vomiting
  - Jaw, neck, or back pain
  - Discomfort or pain in left arm or shoulder
  - Shortness of breath

Sources: heart.org, sciencedaily.com

Pain or discomfort in the chest

- Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back

- It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain

- Chest pain or discomfort is the most common warning sign of a heart attack for both men and women

- Not all chest pain is a sign of a heart attack - **angina** is a common type of chest pain, usually lasting only a few minutes, caused by insufficient blood or oxygen supply to the heart muscle

Sources: heart.org, sciencedaily.com

The bullets in these two slides are nicely formatted to make the contents easy for a reader to engage with - there are even some sub-bullets. But numbering can make these slides even more effective:

Overview of heart attack warning signs

- Heart attacks occur when the blood flow that brings oxygen to the heart muscle is severely reduced or cut off completely

- This happens when the arteries that supply oxygen to the heart become narrow from a buildup of plaque - fat, cholesterol, and other substances

- Each minute without treatment decreases the likelihood of surviving without disability

- Today, we will discuss five heart attack warning signs:
  1) Pain or discomfort in the chest
  2) Lightheadedness, nausea, or vomiting
  3) Jaw, neck, or back pain
  4) Discomfort or pain in left arm or shoulder
  5) Shortness of breath

Sources: *heart.org*, *sciencedaily.com*

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① Pain or discomfort in the chest

- Most heart attacks involve discomfort in the center of the chest that lasts more than a few minutes, or that goes away and comes back

- It can feel like uncomfortable pressure, squeezing, fullness, or pain

- Chest pain or discomfort is the most common warning sign of a heart attack for both men and women

- Not all chest pain is a sign of a heart attack - **angina** is a common type of chest pain, usually lasting only a few minutes, caused by insufficient blood or oxygen supply to the heart muscle

Sources: *heart.org*, *sciencedaily.com*

In this new version, the topics that will be discussed are numbered, instead of bulleted. This allows the title of the detail page to have a number next to it as well, tying it back to the original list.

It's a subtle difference that works particularly well in long documents. It allows the audience to more easily place where they are in a presentation and give them a sense of timing. It helps them put a list of topics into context, especially if there is some kind of order or importance. And if someone is reviewing the presentation later, numbering the topics and titles makes it easier for them to find specific content they might be looking for.

Numbering like this is a great way to take bullets in presentations one step farther. Consider using it next time you have a list of topics to discuss.

2B. Avoid long, dense paragraphs

You might notice that there is some extra spacing between lines of this book and that most of the paragraphs are only two or three sentences long. This is intentional—it was designed to make the book easier to read.

Long, dense paragraphs with no spacing in between the lines make it harder to pull out the central messages of a piece of writing. Instead, to make things simpler, you can break up your ideas into smaller paragraphs, and increase the spacing between the lines. This way, it will be easier for your reader to understand what you are trying to communicate.

In the following sections, we'll take a look at some examples of how adding space can make your writing easier to read in any context.

2B. Example: Break up your emails into several shorter paragraphs

Email is a particularly important place to avoid long, dense paragraphs. It can be tempting to write an entire email as a single paragraph, especially since most emails aren't more than several sentences long. In addition, most email clients come with default formatting settings, which often don't leave much space between lines of an email. These are two factors that make long, dense paragraphs especially common in emails.

However, as we've seen in previous sections, clarity is particularly important in emails. If readers aren't able to quickly understand the core message, they might stop reading midway through, or plan to come back to the email later—perhaps forgetting to respond altogether.

Take the following email as an example:

Dear Shanice,

Thanks again for your help at the end of last week. I'm attaching the latest schedule for the off-site on the 19th and 20th. Can you take another look through the plan? I'd especially like your feedback on the breakouts—I'm not sure we will have enough time for all of the sessions. Also, have you heard anything back from the caterers about whether they will be able to provide a vegetarian option? I'll see you in the staff meeting this afternoon!

Thanks,
Maureen

The writing here is fairly concise, so there isn't much to improve there. But it's still hard to read because the text is crowded so close together. To fix this, we could break up the single paragraph into much shorter sections, each with one core idea. We could also add more spacing in between the lines to make the text easier to read. (It's also a good idea to check that the font size is legible—at least 12 points is preferable.)

A reworked version might look something like this:

Dear Shanice,

Thanks again for your help at the end of last week.

I'm attaching the latest schedule for the off-site on the 19th and 20th. Can you take another look through the plan? I'd especially like your feedback on the breakouts— I'm not sure if we will have enough time for all of the sessions.

Also, have you heard anything back from the caterers about whether they will be able to provide a vegetarian option?

I'll see you in the staff meeting this afternoon!

Thanks,

Maureen

Without making any changes to the wording at all, we've managed to make this email much clearer and easier to read. It's also more likely that Shanice will respond to Maureen's questions, since it's now much clearer what the email is asking her to do.

This is one of the simplest ways to make writing easier to understand, since it doesn't involve changing the way you write at all—only how you format your writing. Hopefully, the example above inspires you to write shorter paragraphs, or perhaps even to adjust the default formatting in your emails.

2B. Example: Long paragraphs in presentations put the audience to sleep

Presentations for use with an audience should never contain long paragraphs. It will take too much time for the audience to read, and they will likely lose interest halfway through. And besides, the information in a paragraph of text can be represented much more clearly and efficiently on a presentation slide.

Take the following slide as an example:

Performance overview

- Since 2015, ACME Co. has consistently outperformed expectations. In 2015, the stock price rose 50% as ACME beat consensus earnings estimates in each quarter. In 2016, the company had over $1 billion in revenue for the first time. And in 2017, EBITDA increased by 10% year-over-year. So far in 2018, ACME has already increased earnings guidance for the first two quarters of the year.

- The outlook is strong for 2019 and beyond. Recent re-financing of $200m in debt has given ACME additional flexibility to invest in new products and markets. The leadership team is growing, with over 70% of new leadership appointments in the last two years coming from internal sources. And consumers continue to have faith in ACME, with a recent internal survey concluding that 83% of widget consumers have a positive opinion of ACME.

These long paragraphs don't take advantage of any of the benefits of the bullet points. This slide might as well be a written memo or white paper. The dense style makes it much harder for a reader to digest the information, especially if it's being presented to a live audience.

Here is an example of how this slide could be improved by breaking up the long paragraphs:

Since 2015, ACME Co. has consistently outperformed expectations

- In 2015, the stock price rose 50% as ACME beat consensus earnings estimates in each quarter

- In 2016, the company had over $1 billion in revenue for the first time

- In 2017, EBITDA increased by 10% year-over-year

> **So far in 2018, ACME has already increased earnings guidance for the first two quarters of the year**

The outlook is strong for 2019 and beyond

- Recent re-financing of $200m in debt has given ACME additional flexibility to invest in new products and markets

- Over 70% of new leadership appointments in the last two years has come from internal sources

- A recent internal survey found that 83% of widget consumers have a positive opinion of ACME

You'll notice that the slide has been split into two. There is way too much content on the original slide; dividing it in two allows us to better split apart those long paragraphs. This new format is much easier for an audience to engage with. The topic sentence of the paragraph has been moved to the title, strengthening the impression it will make on the audience. And the supporting evidence has been reformatted into bullets, making it easier to read.

For your next presentation, I'd encourage you to go through to slides and ensure there are no large chunks of text that will make it harder for the audience to engage.

2C. Bold your most important messages

One final way you can use formatting to help your readers is by **bolding important words or messages**. This draws the reader's eye directly to what matters, even if they are only skimming through your content. (While you could use another form of stylized text, such as italics or underlines, they don't draw attention quite as well as bold text.)

Moderation is important here. **If an entire sentence is bold, it doesn't necessarily help narrow the reader's focus at all, since they still have to read the whole thing.** Likewise, bolding only **one** word usually isn't helpful either. Ideally, you should strive to **bold a few words** that represent the main point you are making.

In the following sections, we'll take a look at some examples of how to use bold text in emails and presentations.

2C. Example: Bold important messages in emails to draw attention

Bold text can be a great way to command a reader's attention in an email. Often, a message could be boiled down to only a sentence or two, but there is some important context that adds a lot of text. Bolding what really matters can help identify what is a critical message as opposed to additional context.

For our first example, consider the following email:

Hi team,

I have a few favors to ask of you for the staff meeting tomorrow:

Andrew, could you please order lunch for 12 people? We'll break for lunch at noon, so we'll want the food to arrive before then. You can use our team corporate card to pay.

Maria, would you please go by the conference room this afternoon and make sure everything is set up properly? We'll need 20 chairs. The projector was broken last week, but should have been fixed—if it hasn't, let me know and I will book us another room.

Guy, could you please send me the latest you have on the quarterly results? I know it won't be ready to share tomorrow, but I'd like to have a sense of how the numbers will look in case anyone asks.

Thanks everyone, and see you tomorrow.

Qiumeng

This is a fairly concise message already, so there isn't much need to change the wording. And the formatting makes it easy to read, with one paragraph per idea. However, you might notice that the main purpose of the email is to ask each member of the team to help with a task. All the other information that's included is to provide additional detail or context.

With some simple formatting changes, we can call attention to what exactly is being asked:

Hi team,

I have a few favors to ask of you for the staff meeting tomorrow:

*+ **Andrew,** could you please **order lunch for 12 people?** We'll break for lunch at noon, so we'll want the food to arrive before then. You can use our team corporate card to pay.*

*+ **Maria,** would you please go by the conference room this afternoon and **make sure everything is set up properly?** We'll need 20 chairs. The projector was broken last week, but should have been fixed—if it hasn't, let me know and I will book us another room.*

*+ **Guy,** could you please **send me the latest you have on the quarterly results?** I know it won't be ready to share tomorrow, but I'd like to have a sense of how the numbers will look in case anyone asks.*

Thanks everyone, and see you tomorrow!

Qiumeng

Bolding the most critical part of each request will help ensure that Andrew, Maria, and Guy notice they are being asked to do something for the meeting. And all the detail is still there, so that each person knows the full context of what they're being asked to do. This is a great example of how bolding can be particularly useful for your readers.

2C. Example: Bolding important messages in presentations helps the audience

Bolding your important messages can be even more effective in presentations, where audiences are generally looking for a few takeaways instead of an avalanche of details. Sometimes, you may want to provide a little more context, while still being able to highlight what really matters.

Take this slide we edited in the last section as an example. It has a lot of great detail, but the main points don't really stand out:

ACME performance overview

- In 2015, the stock price rose more than 50% as ACME beat consensus earnings estimates in each quarter

- In 2016, the company had over $1 billion in revenue for the first time, and over $200m in operating profit

- In 2017, EBITDA increased by 10% year-over-year, driven by price efforts that resulted in an 8% increase in contribution margin

So far in 2018, ACME has already increased earnings guidance for the first two quarters of the year

Adding some bold to a few words in each bullet point can help emphasize the messages we want our audience to take away:

ACME performance overview

- **In 2015, the stock price rose more than 50%** as ACME beat consensus earnings estimates in each quarter

- **In 2016, the company had over $1 billion in revenue** for the first time, and over $200m in operating profit

- **In 2017, EBITDA increased by 10%** year-over-year, driven by price efforts that resulted in an 8% increase in contribution margin

So far in 2018, ACME has already increased earnings guidance for the first two quarters of the year

Though the wording hasn't changed at all on this slide, the added bolding makes it much easier to access. It's easier for audience members to skim this page for the main points, while the full detail is still available for those who want to learn more on any of the bullets.

Recap: Use formatting

Formatting can be a powerful tool to help make your writing easier for others to read. In this section, we've highlighted three specific strategies for using formatting:

2A. Use bullets or numbers when making lists—the extra space will make them easier to read, and numbering can help an audience keep track of multiple concepts

2B. Avoid long, dense paragraphs—readers will not engage with these

2C. Bold your most important messages—help your readers by visually highlighting what's most critical for them to read

Of course, these three strategies are only the beginning. Formatting can be used creatively in all kinds of ways to make your writing easier to understand. Think of the examples laid out in this book as a starting point for thinking about how to use formatting more generally.

Two final thoughts on formatting: first, you don't want to go overboard with formatting changes. The goal is to make your writing easier to read, and using different fonts, bright colors, or a combination of different formatting methods will only make it much harder for readers to digest. Stick with the basics—larger font sizes and more whitespace are always helpful.

And secondly, remember to use yourself as a test subject. Before you save the final version of something, take a quick look at it. Ask yourself: does this look easy to read? Am I looking forward to reading this, or does it look like a hassle? Design your formatting to make your writing look like something you would find easy to read, and you'll find success.

Prioritize what matters

"The beginning is the most

important part of any work."

-Plato

This last section will focus on the order of your writing, and how prioritizing your most important points by putting them near the beginning can impact your readers. We'll look at examples of how to prioritize what matters in emails and presentations. But first, we'll discuss why it makes sense to prioritize your most important points.

Why prioritize what matters?

Putting your most important message at the beginning is a great way to make sure your message sticks with your audience. But often, it can be tempting to do the opposite: try and 'build up' to our main message.

Our decisions and opinions naturally come from a long logical process. We don't have the 'answer' handed to us first thing—instead, we have to sort through all kinds of data and figure out what is most important to us before we can make our choice. Because of this, it's often tempting to start by describing all of that detail and context when someone asks a simple question, like "which hotel are we staying in for the conference?" or "what price did we get for our next shipment of widgets?"

However, 'building up' to your message usually isn't a great idea for a few reasons:

- What seems like clear logic to you might be hard for others to follow, especially if they don't know where you are going

- It can be easy for readers to get distracted with the context, instead of focusing on the main point you are trying to make

- Readers may stop reading before they get to the end of a long block of text

For these reasons, it is often helpful to prioritize your most important messages, putting them near the beginning instead of 'building up' to them at the very end.

Two strategies for prioritizing what matters

Here are two specific strategies you can use to help prioritize what matters:

3A. Put the answer first

3B. Take advantage of titles and subjects

This section will cover both strategies, and discuss how they can be implemented in emails, presentations, and other common forms of writing.

3A. Put the answer first

A simple way to prioritize what matters is to make sure you put the answer to any questions at the start of your response. For instance, if someone has written you an email asking a yes or no question, you should make sure that they'll see a clear yes or a clear no within the first couple of sentences of your reply.

This has two major advantages:

1) If the person only wants to know the answer to their question and none of the detail, they can find it easily, without wasting a lot of time reading through a long email

2) Having the answer first will help the reader develop a frame of reference for the rest of the email

Can you think of a time when you asked someone a simple question, and they launched into a long, rambling speech that didn't seem to give a definitive answer? I've experienced this many times, and it's always frustrating to have to ask a question again because you didn't get a clear answer.

I'm frequently guilty of this myself as someone who likes to "think out loud". I constantly have to remind myself to pause, think about what I really want to say, and start with that, instead of deciding what I want to say halfway through my response. Taking time to think about my response is one way of being considerate to those around me.

Now, let's look at some examples of how putting the answer first can be effective in emails and presentations.

3A. Example: Put the answer first in emails by responding to direct questions

As discussed above, putting the answer first is easiest when someone has asked you a direct question - often in an email. Let's imagine that Jeren gets an email from his boss Wendy:

Hi Jeren,

Do you have the quarterly reports finished for Q2? I'd like to take a look at the numbers before we share them with the whole team.

-Wendy

Jeren might reply with something like this:

Wendy,

There are a few items still outstanding with the reports—I need to check a few things on the Midwest region numbers with Amy, and we don't quite have final numbers for some of the allocated corporate costs, although we could use last quarter's as a proxy. All the rest of the numbers are final, so you could take a look if you want, but there would be a few small changes before they're ready to share.

I also think Jeff wanted to take a look at the reports before we share them with the whole team. Let me know if you want me to send over what I have.

Best,

Jeren

Jeren's reply is jumbled up from start to finish—at the beginning it sounds like he isn't finished with the reports, but then he seems to say that they're pretty much done. Wendy might even be more confused after reading this reply.

Here's how Jeren might make things easier for Wendy by putting the answer first:

Wendy,

I have finished the reports with all the information we have available—see attached for the latest version if you want to review.

Please note that there are two small changes that will need to be made:

1) Amy told me she needs to check a few things on the Midwest numbers, so those might change slightly

2) I haven't gotten the final allocated cost numbers yet from Steve, so for now I've plugged in last quarter's as a proxy

Also, Jeff wanted to take a look at the reports before we share them with the whole team. Maybe we should set up some time with him to discuss.

Best,

Jeren

This is a good example of putting the answer first. In this version, he gives a much clearer picture: the work is all done, with just two minor changes that might need to be made. Even better, he's attached the latest draft, which will save Wendy the trouble of sending a follow-up email if she wants to see it. Putting the answer first makes this message much easier for the reader to engage with.

3A. Example: Put your critical messages near the start of presentations

While "putting the answer first" in a reply to a direct question may seem straightforward, it might not be as obvious how this strategy could work in a presentation. The truth is that most presentations are answering an implied question—how is our division performing? Why should your company buy our service? What should we call our new product?

Identifying this question and making it explicit can help you prepare a better presentation in general—it's easier to develop a persuasive argument when you know exactly what you are trying to argue. But the real power from this kind of thinking comes from putting the answer first in your final presentation.

There are a few reasons this is helpful:

- Putting the answer first can help the audience frame their mindset to receive the rest of the presentation (similar to what we saw in the email example above)

- Having your main message near the beginning of a presentation eliminates time pressure and the risk of having to rush through in order to get to the point

Of course, there are certain times when having your answer at the very start of the presentation could be counterproductive. For instance, if your message is surprising or controversial, you may want to give some small amount of context before sharing it. But there is rarely, if ever, a time when it's most appropriate to leave your answer to the very end of a presentation.

Let's imagine ACME is considering whether or not to build a new widget factory. The project team has prepared a presentation for the senior leadership to reveal their findings.

Here is an example slide, which would go near the start of the presentation:

> # ACME Inc should invest to build a new widget factory
>
> - ACME's current annual widget production capacity is 200m, but this **will be inadequate within the next five years**
>   - Conservative projections estimate ACME will need capacity of 205m widgets per year five years from now
>   - If the aggressive growth seen over the past two years in emerging markets continues, **ACME's capacity could run short in as little as three years**
>
> - While the factory would be a significant investment, **ACME would regain the costs in approximately 6 years** from increased sales
>
> - The factory's location could be used to respond to and **encourage growth** in a given global region
>   - **South America and SE Asia are attractive targets**, given their recent growth

This slide gives a complete summary of the project team's recommendations. The rest of the presentation can get into detail on each of these points, backing them up with facts and figures and acknowledging potential downsides. But presenting the answer up front gives the audience a starting point from which to work. It can help them ask insightful questions, or interpret the supporting data. And there's no danger of someone being surprised at the end of the meeting by the recommendation - if someone disagrees, they have the whole meeting to work through their questions with the project team.

It may not always be so straightforward to put the answer first in a presentation. Try to write down exactly what question you are answering with your presentation—you might find that it helps you structure the document. And once you've done that, you can put a summary of the answer at the beginning of the presentation to help your audience better understand your message.

3B. Take advantage of titles and subjects

The first thing someone sees in an email is the subject line, and the first thing they will notice on a PowerPoint slide is the title. These headings are prime real estate for a writer to deliver a message to the reader.

However, it is routine to use generic headings instead of taking the opportunity to make a point. I have seen many emails with subject lines like "Question," "Help Needed," or "FYI," none of which give any insight into what the message is about. (Worse, many emails are sent with no subject at all.) And in presentations, it's common to use simple one- or two-word slide titles, like "Overview" or "Our Strategy". Just like the email subjects, these generic titles don't give the audience much of a clue as to what the overall message of the slide is.

Try to view these headings as an opportunity to make an impression rather than a requirement that needs to be filled. Many email clients show little more than the subject line from each incoming message, so a user has to click on the email to see the full story. (This is especially true for readers who are getting your email on their phone.) Therefore, using the subject line wisely is a great way to connect with your recipients, even before they've opened up your email. Putting in a placeholder subject doesn't help them at all.

You may have noticed that this book has underlined headings at the beginning of each sub-section, in addition to chapter and topic titles. I've tried to make these short but informative summaries of the information that will follow. This is one way to prioritize what matters—by using titles to their full effect.

In the following sections, we'll look at some more examples of how to take advantage of both the subject line in emails and slide titles in a presentation.

3B. Example: Take advantage of subjects in emails with short summaries

The subject line can be a powerful tool to get important messages across to email recipients. The simplest way to do this is to try and synthesize the main point of the email into several words, and then use that summary as the email subject. However, many people still choose to use one-word email subjects, or leave the subject blank altogether.

Take the following example email:

Subject: Update

Hi all,

Staff meeting has been cancelled today since the merchandising meeting is running long. We'll plan to meet again next week instead.

Thanks,

Jack

This is a short email, and it doesn't need to be long, since the message is so simple. But for someone who is scrolling through their inbox, or sees a notification pop up on their phone, the word "Update" is not helpful at all as a subject line. It could be about anything— an update on snacks in the break room, or on Friday night's poker game.

Instead, Jack could easily have included the main message in his subject line:

Subject: Staff meeting cancelled today

Hi all,

Staff meeting has been cancelled today since the merchandising meeting is running long. We'll plan to meet again next week instead.

Thanks,

Jack

Even though the body of the email is identical, changing the subject has made this much more friendly to recipients. The subject contains the most critical information of the email, so readers will know what they need to know without opening it up to read the full text. And those who are curious for more information can still read the full email to find out why the meeting was cancelled or when it will be rescheduled, while those who don't need any more information can ignore the email entirely after reading the subject line.

This is a simple example, but the concept applies to all kinds of emails. Next time you are getting ready to send an email with a one-word subject, ask yourself whether adding a little more information to the subject would help your readers.

Some emails can be sent with only a subject

You may have received emails with no body at all—only a subject. Some examples are "Have you ordered lunch yet?" or "Latest document attached"—the entire message fits in the subject line, and nothing else is needed. (Often these are sent with 'EOM' at the end, which stands for "End Of Message" and lets the reader know that the only message is what is in the subject line.)

These subject-only emails can be useful when you only need to send someone a few words. It means the sender doesn't have to waste time making up some filler to put in the email body, and the reader doesn't even need to open the message at all to read it. Consider trying this out if you have extremely short messages to send.

Of course, it's also helpful to remember the limitations of email as a messaging system. While some people might prefer to be contacted via email, very short messages can also be sent via chat or text message.

3B. Example: Use titles in presentations to summarize each slide

Most slides in a presentation have a slide title at the top of the page, with content like text and pictures filling up the rest of the page below. The slide title is the largest font on the entire page, and it's at the very top, so it's generally the first thing readers will notice. This all makes it prime real estate for important messages.

However, many people ignore this potential, and choose to put in simple one-word headings instead. This forces the audience to read and digest the entire slide to figure out the point. Using a smart title instead can spell out exactly what the audience should take away from a slide.

Below is an example slide we had used earlier in section 2B:

ACME performance overview

- **In 2015, the stock price rose more than 50%** as ACME beat consensus earnings estimates in each quarter

- **In 2016, the company had over $1 billion in revenue** for the first time, and over $200m in operating profit

- **In 2017, EBITDA increased by 10%** year-over-year, driven by price efforts that resulted in an 8% increase in contribution margin

> **So far in 2018, ACME has already increased earnings guidance for the first two quarters of the year**

We've already edited the body of the slide, so our text looks good there. It's concisely written, and well-formatted to help the audience engage.

However, the title is broad and unhelpful—"ACME performance overview" doesn't tell us much. Instead, we have to read the whole page to find out exactly how ACME is performing.

A simple title update can help fix this problem:

ACME performed well over the past three years, and the outlook is good for the future

- **In 2015, the stock price rose more than 50%** as ACME beat consensus earnings estimates in each quarter

- **In 2016, the company had over $1 billion in revenue** for the first time, and over $200m in operating profit

- **In 2017, EBITDA increased by 10%** year-over-year, driven by price efforts that resulted in an 8% increase in contribution margin

> **So far in 2018, ACME has already increased earnings guidance for the first two quarters of the year**

Again, we haven't changed any of the body at all. But changing the title will help the audience engage with the content by setting their expectations appropriately.

Your most important points belong in the largest font and at the top of the page. This makes the slide title a perfect place to summarize your message instead of putting in a simple one- or two-word placeholder. Prioritizing what matters by putting it in the slide title is a great way to help your audience better engage with your content.

Recap: Prioritize what matters

Putting your most important points at the beginning is a great way to make sure they stick with your reader. In this last section, we looked at two specific strategies to prioritize what matters:

3A. Put the answer first - put your most important message at the beginning

3B. Take advantage of titles and subjects - don't waste this valuable space with one- or two-word fillers

These are two great ways to prioritize what matters, but they don't have to be the only ways. See if you can think creatively to get your most important points in front of your readers sooner.

Finally, remember that your important information shouldn't only be at the beginning - instead, you should repeat it later on to make sure it sticks. Putting the answer first is good, but also having it at the end is a great way to wrap things up and emphasize your point. And a good email subject is informative, but it also describes the content that a reader will find if they open up the full message. Prioritizing your important messages also means repeating them throughout your writing.

Final thoughts

Writing more effectively is a choice

In this book, I've outlined three core choices that will help you write more effectively. For each of these three choices, I've also detailed some strategies to implement them into your writing. As a final recap, here are all of the choices and strategies once again:

1) Be concise: be clear, without using more words than you need

    1A. Avoid over-qualifying your statements

    1B. Choose your words carefully and be consistent

    1C. Avoid jargon

2) Use formatting: visually highlight important points

    2A. Use bullets and numbering

    2B. Avoid long, dense paragraphs

    2C. Bold important messages

3) Prioritize what matters: put your important messages near the beginning

    3A. Put the answer first

    3B. Take advantage of titles and subjects

It's important to reiterate that writing effectively is a choice. The easiest, laziest way to write would not use any of the strategies defined in this book. It would be to put whatever comes to mind first out onto the page.

In order to make your writing easier for others to read, you'll need to carefully consider which words you should use, how you should format your document, and what order everything should be in. These decisions all require conscious thought and effort.

Writing with others in mind is important

The conscious effort described above is worthwhile, however, because of the benefits that empathetic writing will bring. Focusing on these choices will result in shorter, simpler

writing that will be more likely to stick with the reader. You will save time for those who are receiving your emails or watching your presentations. You will save your own time by avoiding confusion, clarifications, and follow-ups. And you will help others understand what you are saying—it's easier to make a lasting impact if your audience quickly and easily grasps your message.

These ideas are not the only ways to write with empathy

The choices and strategies laid out in this book are suggestions. They're not meant to be a list of iron-clad rules for you to follow; feel free to use only the ones you like, and only when you think they'll be helpful. Writing with empathy can mean many different things, and it might change drastically depending on the context.

The simplest way to write with empathy is to imagine yourself in your reader's shoes. What will they think of your writing? Will it be easy to engage with, or will they not want to read it? Are the main messages simple to find and understand? What does the audience want to see?

Answering questions like those can help tailor your writing to a specific audience. Some engineers might find technical details critical, and will want to see a lot of them. Executives may prefer to have a high-level synthesis right at the beginning, to help them quickly grasp the overall point. Whoever your audience may be, you can always find ways to make your writing more relevant. And remember that no matter what you are writing, it is meant to be read by other people—not you.

Writing isn't everything

Lastly, remember that there is more to business than being an effective writer, and that writing is only one tool in the communication toolbox. Don't forget that placing a phone call or making an in-person visit can often be more productive than even the best-written email or presentation. And similarly, remember that in the right circumstances, a paper-and-ink note could be worth a thousand emails.