

4 Tips for Writing Better Email

by David Silverman

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After all my posting about what makes for bad business writing, what is my advice for writing well? I'm glad you asked – because that's the subject of the list below.

1. Call to action. The number one thing that separates a memo, report, or PowerPoint from *A Tale of Two Cities* is a call to action. A novel is to be enjoyed. Business writing is intended to get the audience to do something: invest in a popcorn factory, fill out a kidney donor form, or flee the building in an orderly manner.

Questions to ask: Does my email ask the reader to do anything? If not, why am I sending it?

2. Say it up front. M. Night Shyamalan is paid to surprise folks. We are paid to not surprise our boss. Whatever the purpose of your missive, say it in the first line. Mystery and story are great ways to entertain and teach, so unless you're looking for a job doing that, spit out why you're writing up front.

Questions to ask: Can the reader tell from the subject line and first sentence what I'm writing about without going further? If not, why are you insisting that they guess?

3. Assume nothing. Does the reader need to know that the project won't succeed if the subway workers strike, that everything depends on a category 5 hurricane not happening in the next 100 years, or that if Lehman goes under the entire firm will implode? Let the reader know what thinking

has gone on behind the scenes. And when following up, don't assume everyone remembers everything you've said. If you've got any worries that an acronym, term, or reference is going to elicit a confused moment, just explain it.

Questions to ask: Am I relying on what the audience knows or what I think they ought to know? Am I hiding anything from the reader unintentionally? If so, why do I want to surprise them later on?

4. Do the thinking. How many times have you gotten an email that says, "What are your thoughts?" followed by a forwarded chain of messages. That's the writer saying, "I can't be bothered to explain my reasoning or what I want you to focus on." When you write, make sure you've explained what you're thinking and what you want the reader to spend time on.

Questions to ask: Is my email giving my opinion and options for the reader to respond to? If not, why am I making them try to read my mind?

What makes business writing good or bad in your opinion? Is this something that can be taught, or do you just have to have an instinct for communicating? What are your tips?



David Silverman has had ten careers so far, including entrepreneur, executive, and business writing professor. He is the author of *Typo: The Last American Typesetter or How I Made and Lost 4 Million Dollars* and of the April 2011 HBR article, *Synthesis: Constructive Confessions*.

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