

You Are What You Write

Each time you write, you tell a lot about yourself, sometimes unwittingly, and often painting an incomplete or inaccurate picture. While many of you may not expose your good name to a print publication, you're writing more words in your daily email correspondence than Ernest Hemingway wrote in a week! Okay . . . that might be an exaggeration, but maybe not.

It's time to master the written word as a big step toward honing your professional image. Your next big career move might be hanging on a well-written communication. Let your writing be your mirror — look into it and make adjustments until the image you see is an accurate reflection of a very polished professional.

Your words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, stories and novels paint a picture of your heritage, your upbringing, your education, your interests, your passions, your demeanor, your commitment to purpose and more. Truly, you ARE what you write. Everyone judges you by what you write, and everyone's a critic.

While speaking is quite different from writing, there are some tools that can aid both endeavors. You have many tools at your disposal to assist your spoken message: appearance, posture and gestures (**body language**); intonation, inflection, volume, pitch, pauses (**vocal direction**); and **feedback** from the listener. These techniques can assist your writing, too.

BODY LANGUAGE

Your tone is the body language of your written word. Find the right tone to fit the specific communication you're delivering: the vocabulary, the construction of your story, the mood; and use all the right "gestures" to engage, respect, entertain and enlighten your reader, just as you would want to do in giving an oral presentation. In short, your words are powerful; respect the weight of what you write, and wield your authority very carefully.

VOCAL DIRECTION

Your readers hear your voice in your written words. This voice conveys your style, your attitude and your personality. You can provide vocal direction in various ways.

The C-Level Writer: You've been promoted to "chief of writing." There are literary qualities to which you should aspire as you write from your c-level position.

- **Clarity and Conciseness:** Rambling tomes and off-topic fieldtrips, flowery language and mixed/muddled messages, as well as poor grammar/usage and sloppy construction condemn your work to death row.
- **Consistency:** Once you've grabbed your reader's attention, hold on to it by staying true to your voice. A good way to derail your reader is to change your style. Give your reader a message that is consistent with your thesis and conveys your personality throughout.
- **Cleverness (but Not Conceit):** A truly well-written communication has just the right touch of humor, mystery, drama, pathos and word-play . . . a literary *je ne sais quoi* that makes the piece memorable. Don't go overboard, however; you don't want your reader to find your cleverness contrived or "snooty." (I hope a little French isn't too snooty for you, beloved readers.)
- **Correctness:** Mind your grammar P's and Q's, your punctuation, your word choices, your sentence construction and, of course, your facts. If you're citing the work of others, proper attribution is a must. There are many grammar and style references available, and you'd be smart to have several at hand. Finding and sticking to a reputable authority is important.
- **Curiosity and Contentiousness:** Repeatedly ask yourself: Does that make sense? Is there a clearer message that I can impart? Is there information that I am assuming my reader understands? Am I setting the right tone to deliver my message?



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A Little Dubya'll Do Ya: Who, what, where, when and why: Those five W's have been the classic tools of journalists for ages, and they provide a solid framework as you start to map out your story. Not everything you write will have the same tone or voice as a reporter chasing a hot lead on a crime story, but you'll need to cover all your information bases, regardless of your topic. In this attention-deficit-disordered world where everyone is vying for your eye, you'll have to move well beyond the five W's to find your chops in writing. Let's look at the other W's and the questions they raise:

- **Worth:** Is the idea you're presenting worthy of your reader's attention?

- **Wit:** Do your substance and style convey your intelligence to the reader?
- **Warmth:** Can your reader relate to you?
- **Whimsy:** Is there enough "fun" to keep the reader engaged?
- **Weight/Waste-Free:** Do you get to your point(s) clearly and quickly?

Of course, your writing should NOT be weird, woefully-weak, wonky, word-wasteful or wrong. And if it is, you're a "wascally wabbit."

BEST PRACTICES

FEEDBACK

Just as the great speaker watches the audience and makes adjustments to content and tone on the fly, a great writer respects the feedback of a great editor. I don't have language that is sufficiently effusive to describe my love of a good editor. Let's not mistake proofreading for editing — the former is all about catching errors (and that's important!), the latter is about moving from good to great. The editor is the "ear" that will hear a change in voice; the editor is the "eye" that will detect movement in the wrong direction; the editor is the "nose" to sniff out stinky writing; the editor is the best reader you'll ever hope to have.

IN ALL ERNESTY

All my life I've looked at words as though I were seeing them for the first time.

—Ernest Hemingway

We began with a nod to Ernest Hemingway, so it's only fitting that we close with a salute to "Papa." When he was a cub reporter at the *Kansas City Star*, Hemingway was handed a style sheet that he later declared "the best rules I ever learned for the business of writing." Those four rules were:

- **Use short sentences.** Hemingway is noted for his minimalism — his economy of words. It has been said that Hemingway "wrote with simple genius." A brilliant demonstration of his style is revealed in his six-word story: "For sale: baby shoes, never used."
- **Use short first paragraphs.** 'Nuff said.
- **Use vigorous English.** It's all about word choice and conveying an idea with real passion. To quote David Garfinkel's post on his World Copywriting Blog, "Vigorous English is more than the active voice. It's muscular, forceful. Vigorous English comes from passion, focus and intention. It's the difference between putting in a good effort and TRYING to move a boulder...and actually sweating, grunting, straining your muscles to the point of exhaustion...and MOVING the freaking thing!"
- **Be positive, not negative.** It's easy enough to state what something is rather than what something isn't; but be careful with word choices, as you might be conveying a more negative connotation than you expected. For example, in describing a medical procedure as "painless," your intent is to convey a positive tone. But the reader's eye will be drawn to the word "pain," and that's where the

focus is inadvertently shifted. More positive word choices might include "comfortable" or "quick and easy."

I'M POSITIVE!

Even if you don't achieve the acclaim (not to mention the Nobel Prize for Literature) that Hemingway did, you can continually strive to improve your written communication. In so doing, you'll continually improve yourself as a professional. Write on! **ILTA**



Randi Mayes is the Executive Director of ILTA and is responsible for oversight of all operational aspects of the professional association. Prior to her employment with ILTA, Randi held technology management positions in law firms in Austin, Texas and served in volunteer leadership roles within ILTA. A member of the American Society of Association Executives and the Texas Society of Association Executives, she has spoken and written on topics related to leadership development and association management. She can be reached at randi@iltanet.org.

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