

Writing: Write instructions people can follow

If you've ever tried to put together a child's toy or a piece of assemble-it-yourself furniture, you know the aggravation that comes with instructions even engineers would have trouble following. In business we often have to write instructions. It might be a user's manual for a software application or directions for completing a form. Whatever the task, the way you write those instructions determines how well people can complete the task successfully.

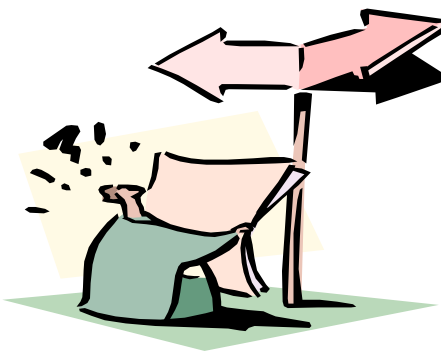
To write instructions people can follow easily, put yourself in the place of those who have little or no knowledge of the procedure, system, or program. You will then be more likely to provide all the steps and detail they need to complete the task unaided.

1. Identify the procedure clearly. Label the process specifically so it is easy to find in a manual or set of instructions.

2. Use action verbs. Begin each step with the action—a verb such as *notify*, *provide*, *select*, *plan*. Keep these action steps short.

3. Supplement action steps where necessary. You might have to give the rationale for the step or offer detail on how to accomplish it. Put this supplemental information in a separate sentence following the action step, with the action highlighted.

4. Include related activities. Some procedures require users to know or do other things that do not fall within the sequence of action steps. For example, a general word of caution about handling equipment that applies to all steps would best be given *before* the action steps. In other instances, users should see the action steps first, then be given information that supports or explains the entire process.



A Few Words about Style

Use the imperative, not the expository, form. That is, speak directly to the reader and begin sentences with the verb. For example:

Expository: The lobby receptionist must be notified....

Imperative: Notify the lobby receptionist...

Use the word "you" or "your" when referring to the user:

Not: If the *employee's* plans change...

But: If *your* plans change...

In writing instructions, keep asking yourself:
What does the user know and need?
Will the user understand this language?

Marketing: Stay visible with your online newsletter

No business can take its customers or clients for granted. Even the most loyal clients can forget about you or be lured away by a competitor. So it makes good business sense to keep yourself in front of your customers—without becoming a nuisance.

Newsletters have always been an effective marketing tool, partly because they are not intrusive. But printing and mailing costs often make hardcopy newsletters prohibitive. Online newsletters, however, are relatively inexpensive to produce and very inexpensive to distribute.

Customize It

Online newsletters can be as long or short as you think your readers want. You can treat all sorts of topics from bulletins about products and services to operational suggestions to updates on regulations, procedures, and other matters of interest to the readers (customers). That last point is critical. Focus on the readers' interests, slanting your marketing message to their needs.

By sending the newsletter online you can provide a link to your website and a vehicle for instant feedback.

That kind of frequent communication keeps you on clients' radar screens.

When you need...

...help writing a newsletter, manual, proposal, or website copy, just contact Cos Ferrara at 201-391-0178 or cos@cosferrara.com

Watch Your Language: Choose the right word, not a second cousin

The wrong word, though close in meaning and appearance to the right word, can cause confusion, even embarrassment. Test yourself on the following pairs of related words and pick the correct one in each pair.

- Several (disinterested, uninterested) parties critiqued the program.
- The staff is (averse, adverse) to this approach.
- Her (laxadaisical, lackadaisical) attitude affected her co-workers.
- This application (allows, enables) users to scan the offerings quickly.
- The two supervisors consulted

(each other, one another).

The answers:

- disinterested*, which means objective, unbiased; *uninterested* means indifferent or not interested.
- averse*, which means having a strong or fixed dislike; *adverse* means unfriendly, antagonistic, unfavorable (adverse conditions).
- Lackadaisical*, which means lacking enthusiasm, listless; *lax* means not firm or strict, careless. You won't find *laxadaisical* in a dictionary. It's an incorrect amalgam of the other

two.

- enables*, which means to give ability or power to; *allow* means to permit.
- each other*, which is used for two; *one another* is used for more than two.

"The difference between the right word and the wrong word is like the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

Mark Twain

Listening: Let 'em talk

Some people just don't listen. They jump in on every conversation, carrying it off or redirecting it with their own insights, feelings, or experiences. Pulling the floor out from under a speaker can be annoying. It can also be a serious deterrent to conducting business.

Egotism drives some people to usurp control of every conversation. Others are always playing "Can you top this?" Sometimes "non-listeners" think they are helping. They pick up the speaker's theme and respond with their own insights or related experiences to convey empathy for the speaker. But empathy may not be what the speaker wants. He/she may just want the



opportunity to "open up" and be heard.

Some managers interrupt for other reasons. They may assume they know where the subordinate is headed, and just take over, completing the subordinate's thought. Then these managers proceed with their answer, solution, or commentary, often leaving the subordinate unfulfilled.

Good managers—good listeners—let people talk.

A Reader Asks...

When should I use italics?

With widespread access to sophisticated printing tools, many people have gone crazy with italics. Here are the correct uses of italics found most frequently in business writing.

Italicize the title of any long work, published or unpublished, such as a book, newsletter, magazine, or report.

Fortune *A-1 System Manual*

(Use quotation marks to identify titles

of short works, such as articles and chapters:)

"Focus on the Customer," in *Effective Selling*, sets the tone.

Italicize letters, words, and numbers used as letters, words, and numbers:

The contract is explicit in its use of *exchange* not *refund*.
I misread the 7 as a 1.

Use italics to stress a word or idea:

We will not accept a late request under *any* circumstances.

Italicize foreign words and colloquial expressions.

We are on solid ground *vis a vis* the investigation.
The company had to *bite the bullet* and move on.

Note: Italics are effective as subheads but they're not required.