

Writing: Make the business press your writing textbook

You can learn much about writing from The Wall Street Journal. Consider the passage below. Even for a sophisticated audience, the writer makes the reading easy. How? By using many of the techniques we stress in *Communicating on the Job*. Let's take a look..

Vivid words

Conversational language

Action verbs

Highlight with dash

Conversational contraction

Transition

Word choice

Overall:

Organized in unified paragraphs around topic sentences. Uses transitions, short sentences, few long words, conversational language, vivid words. Makes limited use of passive voice.

Readability level:

Job creation was, as ever, a linchpin economic issue in 2004. The government's jobs reports early in the year gave economists little reason to cast aside talk of a "jobless" recovery. The specter of offshoring haunted many workers. Then, hiring surged in the spring amid signs that companies were relieving some pent-up demand for new employees. But job growth turned slow again toward the end of the summer as energy prices soared, damping businesses' hiring plans. With the exception of October, job growth has been tepid on average through the second half of the year.

The unemployment rate wobbled throughout 2004 as discouraged workers -- who aren't counted in the official tally of the unemployed unless they are actively looking for work -- entered and exited the labor pool. Continued high productivity growth, which meant that employers could meet more demand for their products and services with fewer workers, held down hiring. Also, some economists have argued that diminished real earnings and increasingly shorter workweeks (which often are a sign of more temporary hiring or the addition of jobs with little or no benefits) are worrying signs for the broader economy.

Forecasters say that without a sustained pickup in employment, economic growth could be limited, and there's been little news to suggest that a big uptick is in the cards. Recent Federal Reserve reports on factory hiring in the Northeast offered a mixed outlook. The Bush administration is also less optimistic about the job market, and recently slashed its official forecast for U.S. hiring.

Source: *The Wall Street Journal*

The next time you read a well-written article in a business paper or magazine, examine it for what makes it good. Then try to inject those qualities into your next business document.

Topic sentence; paragraph unified around topic idea

Transition

Action verbs

Vivid words

Topic sentence; paragraph unified around topic idea

Action verb

Topic sentence; paragraph unified around topic idea

Conversational

Action verbs

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Presenting: How to make it brief

After Abraham Lincoln delivered his Gettysburg Address, one newspaper referred to his speech of 271 words as “silly remarks” over which a “veil of oblivion shall be dropped.” That paper showered praise on the other speaker that day who spoke for some two-plus hours. Obviously, Lincoln’s Address is the one the world still knows. The lesson: more is not always better.

So how do you keep your presentation from becoming too long?

1. **Keep your intro short.** In an effort to prepare our audience for our theme, we sometimes give too much warm-up or background material. Reduce your “nice to be here,” set your premise quickly, and get to the heart of your issue.
2. **Limit your talk to three or four points.** By confining yourself, you will more readily cut the nonessentials from your talk.

3. Rely on visuals for small details.

Instead of reading out sales figures and such, put those on a slide or handout. Talk about the concepts inherent in the details.

4. **Time yourself.** After preparing your talk, stand up and recite it aloud. Then you will know how much time you’ll need. If you run over, prune some more.
5. **Leave some time.** Don’t plan to speak for 20 minutes if you’ve been allotted 20 minutes. Plan to end with a few minutes to spare. Your audience will like that and you’ll have some cushion for the unexpected.



Mechanics: Semicolons clear up the comma congestion

I recently came across this passage in an investment company’s newsletter.

Oil prices surged in large part because of the discord in the Middle East, escalating demand in China and India, political turmoil in Russia, Africa, and South America, and supply disruptions in the Gulf of Mexico.

The sentence is one long series of causes joined by commas. I had trouble on the first read knowing where one item in the series ended and another began. The problem lies in there being a series within a series: “political turmoil in Russia, Africa, and South America” is one cause in a list of four.

When you have a series within a series, use commas within an item (Russia, Africa, and South America) and **use semicolons between the items:**

Oil prices surged in large part because of the discord in the Middle East; escalating demand in China and India; political turmoil in Russia, Africa, and South America; and supply disruptions in the Gulf of Mexico.

You Try It

Replace commas with semicolons where needed in this sentence.

Management is concerned about slumping sales in retail units, wholesale operations, and repair services, increasing overhead costs for people, buildings, and equipment, and the aging workforce, which is now at an all-time high.

Answer:

Management is concerned about slumping sales in retail units, wholesale operations, and repair services; increasing overhead, including costs for people, buildings, and equipment; and the aging workforce, which is now at an all-time high.

For a quick refresher on your writing and speaking skills, see my *Effective Writing* and *Powerful Presentations*, both available on CD at www.MicroMash.com

Inside Story Headline

This story can fit 150-200 words.

One benefit of using your newsletter as a promotional tool is that you can reuse content from other marketing materials, such as press releases, market studies, and reports.

While your main goal of distributing a newsletter might be to sell your product or service, the key to a successful newsletter is making it useful to your readers.

A great way to add useful content to your newsletter is to develop and write your own

articles, or include a calendar of upcoming events or a special offer that promotes a new product.

You can also research articles or find “filler” articles by accessing the World Wide Web. You can write about a variety of topics but try to keep your articles short.

Much of the content you put in your newsletter can also be used for your Web site. Microsoft Publisher offers a simple way to convert your newsletter to a Web publication. So, when you’re finished writing your

newsletter, convert it to a Web site and post it.



Caption describing picture or graphic.

Inside Story Headline

This story can fit 100-150 words.

The subject matter that appears in newsletters is virtually endless. You can include stories that focus on current technologies or innovations in your field.

You may also want to note business or economic trends, or make predictions for your customers or clients.

If the newsletter is distributed internally, you might comment upon new procedures

or improvements to the business. Sales figures or earnings will show how your business is growing.

Some newsletters include a column that is updated every issue, for instance, an advice column, a book review, a letter from the

president, or an editorial. You can also profile new employees or top customers or vendors.

“To catch the reader’s attention, place an interesting sentence or quote from the story here.”

Inside Story Headline

This story can fit 75-125 words.

Selecting pictures or graphics is an important part of adding content to your newsletter.

Think about your article and ask yourself if the picture supports or enhances the message you’re trying to convey. Avoid selecting images that



Caption describing picture or graphic.

appear to be out of context.

Microsoft Publisher includes thousands of clip art images from which you can choose and import into your newsletter. There are also several tools you can use to draw shapes and symbols.

Once you have chosen an

image, place it close to the article. Be sure to place the caption of the image near the image.

Organization

Tips for effective writing,

Primary Business Address
Your Address Line 2
Your Address Line 3
Your Address Line 4
Phone: 555-555-5555
Fax: 555-555-5555
E-mail: someone@example.com

We're on the Web!
example.Microsoft.com

- Tips for effective writing, speaking, and listening from Cos Ferrara

This would be a good place to insert a short paragraph about your organization. It might include the purpose of the organization, its mission, founding date, and a brief history. You could also include a brief list of the types of products, services, or programs your organization offers, the geographic area covered (for example, western U.S. or European markets), and a profile of the types of customers or members served.

It would also be useful to include a contact name for readers who want more information about the organization.

Back Page Story Headline

This story can fit 175-225 words.

If your newsletter is folded and mailed, this story will appear on the back. So, it's a good idea to make it easy to read at a glance.

A question and answer session is a good way to quickly capture the attention of readers. You can either compile questions that you've received since the last edition or you can summarize some generic questions that are frequently asked about your organization.

A listing of names and titles of managers in your organization is a good way to give your newsletter a personal touch. If your organization is small, you may want to list the names of all employees.

If you have any prices of standard products or services, you can include a listing of

those here. You may want to refer your readers to any other forms of communication that you've created for your organization.

You can also use this space to remind readers to mark their calendars for a regular event, such as a breakfast meeting for vendors every third Tuesday of the month, or a biannual charity auction.

If space is available, this is a good place to insert a clip art image or some other graphic.



Caption describing picture or graphic.