

Writing Skills

See also: [Study Skills](#)

Writing skills are an important part of communication. Good writing skills allow you to communicate your message with clarity and ease to a far larger audience than through face-to-face or telephone conversations.

You might be called upon to [write a report](#), plan or strategy at work; write a grant application or [press release](#) within a volunteering role; or you may fancy communicating your ideas online via a blog.

And, of course, a well written [CV or résumé](#) with no spelling or grammatical mistakes is essential if you want a new job.

Today, when anyone can be their own publisher, we see more and more examples of poor writing skills both in print and on the web. Poor writing skills create poor first impressions and many readers will have an immediate negative reaction if they spot a [spelling](#) or [grammatical mistake](#). As just one example, a spelling mistake on a commercial web page may cause potential customers to doubt the credibility of the website and the organisation.

For many of us it will have been a long time since we were taught any writing skills and a refresher may be needed.

This section of SkillsYouNeed aims to make you think about your writing - from [grammar](#), [spelling](#) and [punctuation](#), how to **plan** your writing, and the various processes and checks to go through before pressing print or broadcasting your message online. It also provides guides for specific pieces of writing that you may need to produce, whether at school, university, or in the workplace.

Grammar, Spelling and Punctuation

Correct grammar, punctuation and spelling are key in written communications. The reader will form an opinion of you, the author, based on both the content and presentation, and errors are likely to lead them to form a negative impression.

If you are unconvinced about the importance of accurate writing, think of the clues we use to identify spam emails, “phishing” websites, and counterfeit products: poor grammar and spelling.

Similarly, some employers state publicly that any **CV or résumé** containing spelling or grammatical mistakes will be rejected immediately, whilst a [BBCnews article](#) quotes research that calculates spelling mistakes cost online businesses “millions” in lost sales.

Checking for poor writing and spelling mistakes should be seen as a courtesy to your readers since it can take them much longer to understand the messages in your writing if they have to think and re-read text to decipher these.

All written communications should therefore be re-read before sending to print, or hitting the send button in the case of emails, as it is likely that there will be errors. Do not assume that spelling and grammar checkers will identify all mistakes as many incorrect words can indeed be spelt correctly (for example, when “their” is used instead of “there” or “principle” instead of “principal”) or entire words may be missing. If at all possible, take a break before re-reading and checking your writing, as you are more likely to notice problems when you read it fresh.

Even if you know spelling and grammar rules, you should still double-check your work or, even better, have it proof-read by somebody else. Our brains work faster than our fingers can type and accidental typographical errors (typos) inevitably creep in.

Improving Your Writing Skills

The good news is that writing is a skill which can be learned like any other. One trick for checking and improving your work is to read it aloud. Reading text forces you to slow down and you may pick up problems with the flow that your eye would otherwise skip over.

Reading

Another way to improve your writing skills is to read - as you read you pick up new vocabulary and engage with different writing styles.

See our pages: [Effective Reading and Writing Styles](#) for more information.

There are a number of areas to bear in mind as you write.

As well as grammar, spelling and punctuation, it's important to **remember your audience**. Always write with your audience in mind, and it can also help to bear in mind **the medium** in which you plan to publish. This knowledge will help you to decide whether you need to write in a **formal style or a more informal one**, and will also help you to decide on a suitable **structure**.

Finally, have a look at our page on **Common Mistakes in Writing** and **Gender Neutral Language** to help you avoid falling into some easy traps.

WARNING!

There is a time and a place for clichés. They exist because they explain exactly what we want to say in easy-to-understand terms. But some people find them very annoying, and you need to use them with care. See our page on [What is a Cliché?](#) for more information.

Writing under Specific Circumstances

There are many times in your life when you will be asked to write something very specific. Whether this is to take notes of a conversation, write the minutes of a formal meeting, or prepare a report, all these types of writing require specific skills, and usually a particular style.

Writing at Home

Many people would say that the art of letter-writing is dying out. However, there are still many times when you need to put pen (or word processor) to paper. See our page on [How to Write a Letter](#) for more.

Writing in the Workplace

Being able to write well is a skill which will get you a long way in the workplace, partly because it is fairly rare in many places.

One skill that many people lack, especially in management and other professional environments is the ability to write in plain English. That is avoiding unnecessary jargon, industry specific buzzwords and clichés and keeping sentences short and concise. See our page [Writing in Plain English](#) for more.

Taking the time to polish your writing skills is likely to pay off in the longer term, and learning how to write specific types of documents will also be useful.

See our pages on [How to write a report, a business case, an executive summary and a press release](#) for some specific examples that may also have wider applications. For example, being able to prepare a strong summary is a skill that is extremely useful for briefing senior managers.

You may also find our pages on [note taking for reading](#), [note taking for verbal exchanges](#) and [taking minutes: the role of the secretary](#) useful if your job or a voluntary role includes recording formal meetings.

Writing Skills

Getting Your Written Message Across Clearly

Improve your writing skills,
with James Manktelow & Amy Carlson.

A colleague has just sent you an email relating to a meeting you're having in one hour's time. The email is supposed to contain key information that you need to present, as part of the business case for an important project.

But there's a problem: the email is so badly written that you can't find the data you need. There are misspellings and incomplete sentences, and the paragraphs are so long and confusing that it takes you three times more than it should to find the information you want. As a result, you're under-prepared for the meeting, and it doesn't go as well as you want it to.

Have you ever faced a situation similar to this? In today's information overload world, it's vital to communicate clearly, concisely and effectively. People don't have time to read book-length emails, and they don't have the patience to scour badly-constructed emails for "buried" points.

The better your writing skills are, the better the impression you'll make on the people around you – including your boss, your colleagues, and your clients. You never know how far these good impressions will take you!

In this article, we'll look at how you can improve your writing skills and avoid common mistakes.

Audience and Format

The first step to writing clearly is choosing the appropriate format. Do you need to send an informal [email](#) ? Write a detailed [report](#) ? Create advertising copy? Or write a formal letter?

The format, as well as your audience, will define your "writing voice" – that is, how formal or relaxed the tone should be. For instance, if you write an email to a prospective client, should it have the same tone as an email to a friend?

Definitely not.

Start by identifying who will read your message. Is it targeted at senior managers, the entire human resources team, or a small group of engineers? With everything you write, your readers, or recipients, should define your tone as well as aspects of the content.

Composition and Style

Once you know what you're writing, and for whom you're writing, you actually have to start writing.

A blank, white computer screen is often intimidating. And it's easy to get stuck because you don't know how to start. Try these tips for composing and styling your document:

- **Start with your audience** – Remember, your readers may know nothing about what you're telling them. What do they need to know first?
- **Create an outline** – This is especially helpful if you're writing a longer document such as a report, presentation, or speech. Outlines help you identify which steps to take in which order, and they help you break the task up into manageable pieces of information.
- **Use AIDA** – If you're writing something that must inspire action in the reader, follow the [Attention-Interest-Desire-Action \(AIDA\)](#) ⁺ formula. These four steps can help guide you through the writing process.
- **Try some empathy** – For instance, if you're writing a sales letter for prospective clients, why should they care about your product or sales pitch? What's the benefit for them? Remember your audience's needs at all times.
- **Use the Rhetorical Triangle** – If you're trying to persuade someone to do something, make sure that you communicate why people should listen to you, pitch your message in a way that engages your audience, and present information rationally and coherently. Our article on the [Rhetorical Triangle](#) ⁺ can help you make your case in the most effective way.
- **Identify your main theme** – If you're having trouble defining the main theme of your message, pretend that you have 15 seconds to explain your position. What do you say? This is likely to be your main theme.
- **Use simple language** – Unless you're writing a scholarly article, it's usually best to use [simple](#) ⁺, direct language. Don't use long words just to impress people.

Structure

Your document should be as "reader friendly" as possible. Use headings, subheadings, bullet points, and numbering whenever possible to break up the text.

After all, what's easier to read – a page full of long paragraphs, or a page that's broken up into short paragraphs, with section headings and bullet points? A document that's easy to scan will get read more often than a document with long, dense paragraphs of text.

Headers should grab the reader's attention. Using [questions](#) ⁺ is often a good idea, especially in advertising copy or reports, because questions help keep the reader engaged and curious.

In emails and proposals, use short, factual headings and subheadings, like the ones in this article.

Adding [graphs and charts](#) ⁺ is also a smart way to break up your text. These visual aids not only keep the reader's eye engaged, but they can communicate important information much more quickly than text.

Grammatical Errors

You probably don't need us to tell you that errors in your document will make you look unprofessional. It's essential to learn grammar properly, and to avoid common mistakes that your spell checker won't find.

Here are some examples of commonly misused words:

Affect/Effect

"Affect" is a verb meaning to influence. (Example: The economic forecast will affect our projected income.)

"Effect" is a noun meaning the result or outcome. (Example: What is the effect of the proposal?)

Then/Than

"Then" is typically an adverb indicating a sequence in time. (Example: We went to dinner, then we saw a movie.)

"Than" is a conjunction used for comparison. (Example: The dinner was more expensive than the movie.)

Your/You're

"Your" is a possessive. (Example: Is that your file?)

"You're" is a contraction of "you are." (Example: You're the new manager.)

Note: Also watch out for other common homophones (words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings) – such as their/they're/there, to/too/two, and so on.

Its/It's

"Its" is a possessive. (Example: Is that its motor?)

"It's" is a contraction of "It is." (Example: It's often that heavy.) (Yes, it is this way around!)

Company's/Companies (and Other Possessives Versus Plurals)

"Company's" indicates possession. (Example: The company's trucks hadn't been maintained properly.)

"Companies" is plural. (Example: The companies in this industry are suffering.)

To learn more about commonly misused words, misused apostrophes, and other grammatical errors, take our Bite-Sized Training session on [Written Communication](#).

Tip:

Some of your readers – arguably an increasing number – won't be perfect at spelling and grammar. They may not notice if you make these errors. But don't use this as an excuse: there will usually be people, senior managers in particular, who **will** notice!

Because of this, everything you write should be of a quality that every reader will find acceptable.

Proofing

The enemy of good proofreading is speed. Many people rush through their documents, but this is how you miss mistakes. Follow these guidelines to check what you've written:

- **Proof your headers and subheaders** – People often skip these and focus on the text alone. Just because headers are big and bold doesn't mean they're error free!
- **Read the document out loud** – This forces you to go more slowly, so that you're more likely to catch mistakes.
- **Use your finger to follow text as you read** – This is another trick that helps you slow down.
- **Start at the end of your document** – Proofread one sentence at a time, working your way from the end to the beginning. This helps you focus on errors, not on content.

Key Points

More than ever, it's important to know how to communicate your point quickly and professionally. Many people spend a lot of time writing and reading, so the better you are at this form of communication, the more successful you're likely to be.

Identify your audience before you start creating your document. And if you feel that there's too much information to include, create an outline to help organize your thoughts. Learning grammatical and stylistic techniques will also help you write more clearly; and be sure to proof the final document. Like most things, the more you write, the better you're going to be!

This site teaches you the skills you need for a happy and successful career; and this is just one of many tools and resources that you'll find here at Mind Tools. Subscribe to our [free newsletter](#), or [join the Mind Tools Club](#) and really supercharge your career!



From the website: <http://www.ideafit.com/fitness-library/effective-written-communication>

Stepping Up to the Pen

by [Deidre King, MA](#) on Oct 01, 2006

How to Improve Written Communication.

When you stop to think about it, fitness professionals are highly skilled communicators. Whether you are working on the fitness floor with clients or addressing colleagues at conventions, you are translating highly technical information into understandable language that educates and motivates. For the most part, however, these skills have been honed in person and over the telephone. But what happens when you need to prepare written correspondence? Do you know the elements of effective written communication? Are you presenting the same professional image in writing as you do in person? Use the information below to ensure that your written documents reflect the high level of professionalism and credibility you've worked so hard to earn.

Types of Correspondence

Effective written communication affects all aspects of your fitness career, including "your ability to successfully connect with your staff, educate your clients about important fitness concepts and make a positive first impression on prospective customers," according to Amanda Vogel, MA, writer and owner of Active Voice, a writing, editing and consulting service for fitness professionals, based in Vancouver, British Columbia.

Honing excellent writing skills doesn't apply only to the marketing materials you commonly think of, such as articles, newsletters, brochures, fliers and website copy. Effective written communication also applies to more routine, business-related correspondence, including the documents described below.

Welcome Letters to New Clients and Participants. The sale of a fitness program doesn't stop when your clients register for your program or class. A welcome letter that thanks them for their business and summarizes how your exercise program will help meet their fitness goals shows that you're a professional and their decision to work with you was a smart one.

Requests for Medical Clearance. When you have clients or class participants with health issues that require medical approval, there are [insurance](#) and legal policies that require you to obtain that approval in writing. While it's common practice to use the one-size-fits-all medical clearance form, a more effective approach would be to include, along with the form, a well-written cover letter that explains who you are, your credentials and how you plan to approach your client's (their patient's) exercise program.

Internal Organizational Memos. Whether you own a studio or work for a fitness facility, you may have to write correspondence to your subordinates, superiors or co-workers. The purpose could be as simple as introducing new fitness staff or as complex as giving the details about a major change in your company's pricing structure.

Instructions. Instructional correspondence helps the reader complete a task. You may need to write exercise instructions for your clients, equipment operation instructions for club members, procedures on how to complete a transaction for staff, or posters with instructions about what steps to take in an emergency.

Incident Reports. Unfortunately, the nature of the fitness business exposes you to the possibility of experiencing a health- or safety-related episode with clients, class participants or staff. For an Incident Report as for a Request for Medical Clearance, you most likely will use a standard form; however, most forms require a written statement, either within the form or attached to it, describing the details of what occurred and when, who was involved and where it happened.

Five Keys to Effective Written Communication

Of course, you might have the opportunity to write other types of correspondence as a fitness professional. So how do you make sure you clearly communicate your purpose regardless of the document? No matter which type of writing you do, “get your general ideas on paper or the computer screen—this is your first draft,” says Vogel. “Now go back and edit.”

When editing, consider the following factors:

Key 1: Use a Professional Tone. Your readers will form an opinion of you from the content, the style and, most important, the attitude and tone that come across in your writing. Create a professional, positive tone by using simple, direct language. Adopt a “you-attitude” versus an “I-attitude,” to show that you’re sincere in your focus on the reader rather than on yourself as the writer.

If you need to convey unwelcome information, craft it with special care. When denying a request or sharing bad news, acknowledge the problem or situation and diplomatically explain the background and your position. If responding to a request, make your “no” response clear so there’s no misunderstanding. If you can, suggest an alternative and build goodwill as much as possible by offering to answer any questions the reader may have.

Key 2: Know Your Audience. The intended readers of your correspondence can vary from medical doctors, lawyers and other fitness professionals to clients of all occupations and ages, including children. You must consider their backgrounds, technical expertise and educational levels as well as their mindsets and possible reactions to your writing. This process is no easy task, but the more time you take to identify your audience, the more effective your message will be.

Key 3: Organize Your Information Clearly. Arrange your thoughts so that your correspondence can be read quickly and comprehended easily. Organize the information based on your purpose. For example, when writing instructions, organize your information in sequential, or step-by-step, order. For incident reports, write in chronological order, explaining how the events unfolded. When sharing news and information, use the “6Ws”—who, what, when, where, why and how—to guide you.

Key 4: Use the Right Format. Format refers to how your correspondence is laid out on paper or online. Usually writers choose their formats based on the method of delivery—letter, memo or e-mail. Each type has distinct format conventions (guidelines) for including and placing elements such as the date, addressee, subject line, salutation, message body, closing line, signature block and company letterhead or logo. (See “Correspondence Format Conventions” on page 114 for examples.)

Key 5: Use Visual Elements Carefully. Visual elements—such as font size and type; underlined, italicized or bold text; and bulleted or numbered lists—help emphasize key points and make your correspondence more effective. With all the options available, be careful not to go overboard, especially with fonts. Choose font types based on your document’s purpose, audience and formality. Vogel says to avoid using all caps, which can impede readability and give the wrong impression. “Your goal is to make writing as easy to read as possible,” she says.

The Importance of Font Selection

Effective written communication includes your font choice because it can affect the comfort, ease and readability of your correspondence. Choose the most appropriate computer-text font for your document, based on its purpose, audience and formality.

1. For formal documents, such as letters and company memos, use businesslike serif fonts, such as Times New Roman, Book Antigua, Garamond or Courier New.
2. For less formal documents and e-mail messages, use an easy-to-read font, either serif (like those fonts just mentioned above) or sans serif. Good sans serif choices are Arial, CG Omega, Tahoma, Trebuchet and Verdana.
3. Avoid using “social” fonts, i.e., those used for invitations and restaurant menus, such as Bradley Hand, Monotype Corsiva, and Pointed Brush, to name a few. Social fonts are inappropriate for business correspondence because they are more difficult to read, and they give a visual cue that the content is not serious or professional.
4. Use the font size and text attributes (all caps, bold, italic, underline) carefully. When the font is too large, the document may appear juvenile; and when it’s too small, the document is crowded and hard to read. Use text attributes only to help emphasize key words. Font size should be consistent and easy on the eyes.

Avoid Common Mistakes

Because you write correspondence quickly, without the benefit of a professional editor or graphic designer to review it, you are more likely to make common mistakes that can discredit you, such as poor grammar, punctuation and spelling. Take time to proofread your own writing, and use the spelling and grammar check features of your software or e-mail programs.

Vogel says it’s important to carefully consider writing style. “Many fitness pros write in a very formal or technical style,” she says. “For example, a memo meant to educate and excite your staff about an upcoming fitness event should not read like a college essay.” Conversely, she says, some fitness pros try to write in a conversational tone that becomes too casual, sloppy or careless.

Some common mistakes can have legal or ethical consequences as well. Mistakes of this kind might include omitting dates, names and necessary signatures; failing to use company letterhead or logo; and using inappropriate, exclusionary or gender-based language.

Beyond the Routine

Without question, effective written communication will take you far in your fitness career. But it will also prepare you to write the types of documents that aren’t so routine, such as the all-important sales letters and business proposals. When your company decides to expand or bid on contracts for corporate wellness or fitness programs, your skills will position you well to persuade an audience that your company’s services are the best. And, because these documents

can result in thousands of dollars in sales and revenue, your company won't rely on just anybody. They'll rely on you, the fitness professional who not only knows the technical side of the business but can also step up to the pen to make things happen.

guidelines for letters, memos and e-mails

1. Always use official company letterhead or logo.
2. Apply the appropriate format conventions. Include a specific subject line. Consider your attitude/tone and audience.
3. Organize your message using sequential, chronological, problem-solution or "6Ws" (who, what, when, where, why and how) methods. Break out key points using bulleted or numbered lists.
4. State your call to action and due date, when necessary.
5. End in a friendly manner by thanking the reader and including your contact information. Close with the appropriate formality: Sincerely, Warm Regards, Very Truly Yours, Cordially, Best, etc. Indicate whether you have included any related documents with your correspondence.

Resources

For more information on how to improve written communication, consult these resources:

- O'Connor, P.T. 2004. *Woe Is I— The Grammarphobe's Guide to Better English in Plain English*. New York: Riverhead.
- Strunk, W., & White, E.B. 2000. *The Elements of Style*. New York: Longman.
- Venolia, J. 2001. *Write Right! A Desktop Digest of Punctuation, Grammar, and Style*. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press.
- Vogel, A. *51 Need-to-Know Writing & Marketing Tips for Fitness Pros*— a free e-booklet created and written by Amanda Vogel, MA, writer and owner of Active Voice Writing Service. Available at www.activevoice.ca.