
WRITING WITH CLARITY

The reason your CEO retains a PR department is he or she needs people who know how to write. Writing – communicating through the written word – is the fundamental skill of public relations professionals. PR professionals must be expert writers.

The key to competent writing is "clarity" – composing written documents that people understand. Public relations writers must want key publics to "understand" what they write. Promoting understanding through the clarity of communications must be the overriding objective of PR writing.

Here are some suggestions on better writing:

Write for a general audience

Good writers say, "A writer's sense of audience controls his voice." Literally translated, this means if you imagine an audience of specialists, your writing will be stilted and cumbersome. By contrast, if you write for a general audience, you will be forced to "translate" terms into language anyone can understand. If you write for your mother, for example, your language will be clearer, simpler and more direct. With no disrespect to your mom, writing with her in mind will assure that you get through to a broad readership.

Lighten up on the pace of information

Readers don't know as much as you do, so approach them gradually with difficult information. Stated another way, don't "over pack" information into long-winded, chock-full-of-data paragraphs. For example, the following is not easy to understand: "Enron's off balance sheet accounting for pro forma revenues were geared to providing forward-based reimbursement, complying with Financial Accounting Standards Board materiality provisions but inconsistent with federal fair disclosure guidelines effecting full and fair dissemination of corporate data."

Much better to confront such complicated and inextricably intertwined data with an approach that allows you to.....

Introduce difficult concepts one at a time

In order to "ease" readers into important information, each separate element should be discussed in isolation and then connected in an aggregated manner.

For example, in the Enron story, concepts such as "off balance sheet accounting," "materiality," and "fair disclosure" should each be explained first and then discussed in combination.

Readers should be given a chance to relax, think and understand.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat

In oral presentations, repetition is imperative to ensure understanding. While written copy can't repeat as much – or as blatantly – as in the spoken word, repetition is nonetheless important. Listeners and readers are generally lazy, so they need to be led to the point. In written copy then, the trick is to use repetition in different ways. That is, repeat the main point through anecdotes, statistics, quotations, illustrations, etc. While all such approaches present varied data, they still may serve to repeat the essential point.

Keep leads clear

The "lead" – beginning, opening, and start of the written text – is a critical element. If the lead is jammed with all sorts of facts and figures, readers may get frustrated and lose interest in continuing.

Use simple sentences

Simple sentences are easier to understand than complex ones. Simple sentences contain one clause and one idea. A series of simple sentences slow down the pace for readers. Simple sentences give readers time to digest and understand. Simple sentences should be used generously.

Numbers can be numbing

Statistics are powerful proofs. They should be used to reinforce written points. But.....the following is just tedious. "Last year, the firm earned \$56.7 million, before an extraordinary loss of \$24.6 million as a result of foreign exchange translation losses of \$14.2 million and goodwill charges related to discontinued subsidiaries of \$10.4 million."

Again, such continuous counting will put off readers. Much better is to cite only those most important numbers that will help interpret the significance of the story.

For example:

- INSTEAD of "53.2% of the case patients taking 325mg of aspirin daily, significantly decreased their relative risk of suffering a re-infarction during the study period"
- SAY "More than half the people taking an aspirin a day greatly reduced their chances of a second heart attack"

Translate jargon

The key in any writing is to always make terms understandable and limit jargon. Every industry, from banking to government, from healthcare to show business, has its own jargon. Industry audiences, therefore, possess their own vocabulary, and are comfortable with certain technical terms. Nonetheless, to ensure that everybody – not just industry insiders –

understand your terms, jargon should be kept to a minimum. If The Wall Street Journal takes pains every time it mentions the "Gross National Product" to also define the term as "the total market value of the output of goods and services in the nation" – then so can you explain any jargon you are obliged to include in your copy.

REMEMBER - *Jargon and arcane acronyms confuse audiences*

For example:

A surefire way to lose an opportunity

- The rate went up 10 basis points
- We're considering development of a SNFF or a CCRC
- We ask that you submit exculpatory evidence to the grand jury
- The material has less than 0.65 ppm benzene as measured by the TCLP
- GMP, BD&L, API, CVS.....

The general reaction to such statements is "HUH?"

Reward the reader, vary the elements

A good writer alternates the important with the interesting. Readers asked to absorb difficult concepts or take in statistically laden arguments should be "rewarded" by the writer with a healthy sprinkling of anecdotes and illustrations and examples to vary the tone of the copy. This keeps the reader in the story.

Consider the reader

Finally, always write with the reader in mind. Ask yourself if you were reading this for the first time:

- What does the reader want to know?
- What are the questions the reader may have here?
- What is the impact on the reader?
- What has the text not discussed yet that is important for readers to comprehend?

These 10 suggestions are but a start to making written products more clear. The list may not be all encompassing, but writing with clarity is all-important.

(Excerpted from the workbook of PR Pundit's Seventh PR Workshop held in New Delhi on December 10, 2002)