

# Getting to Grips with Business Writing

## Business Writing Tips #16 - #20



### Tip #16

#### Cut it out

#### **If you don't need a word, cut it.**

If it doesn't add anything to the meaning that needs to be there, get rid of it. Be ruthless. Often when we write more words, rather than less, we obscure the meaning, or make it harder for our reader to understand what we really want to say. When you edit your work (you do edit before you send, don't you?), check for these. Your readers will thank you for it.

### Tautologies

The main offender in this category is the wonderful, often amusing, tautology – that is, when we say the same thing, over and over, again and again in different ways. Listen to people speaking and you'll hear it all the time. It's amazing how often we repeat ourselves. But it's out of place in business writing.

- You don't want to repeat yourself, over and over, again and again.
- You don't want to return back.
- Please rewrite the report again. (This could be okay. You might have already rewritten the report once.)

### Emphasis

Then of course there are the words that we use to intensify another word. But take care. 'Very' before 'large' or 'small' is fine. But 'very', 'quite', 'exceptionally' and the like have no place anywhere near 'unique'. It is unique, or it is not – there are no degrees of uniqueness. So cut them out.

Also avoid having strings of modifiers. 'The tiniest, smallest minority voted against it.' A 'small minority' does the same work, more elegantly.

### Officialiese

Next there is officialiese. Which of the following is easiest to read and understand?

'I refer you to the matter previously discussed in this forum and to the minutes of the meeting of 18 August 2012. In accordance with our previous agreement I would appreciate it if you could sign them and return them promptly to my office before the end of the month, 31 August, to ensure that we have a record of you having seen them. Thanking you in anticipation.'

'Please take a look at the minutes of the 18 August 2012 meeting, sign them, and return them to me by the end of the month. Thank you.'

### Unnecessary Auxiliaries

Unnecessary auxiliaries also give an air of officialdom. This example is from Joe Glaser's *Understanding Style*.

'Students would be well advised to keep a journal, for this can help them consolidate what they may have learned.'

'Students, keep a journal to consolidate what you learn.'

### Elongating usages

These are where we use a string of words when one word, or a shorter string, will perform the task perfectly well. Here are some examples:

#### Old Fashioned

The way in which he spoke to me

As a result of the fact that

To make an application

It is recommended that training be instigated

In the most efficient manner

At that point in time

At this point in time

#### Modern Business English

The way he spoke to me

Because

To apply

[We] should start training

Efficiently

Then

Now

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### Tip #17

#### It's all French to Me, or Latin, or ...

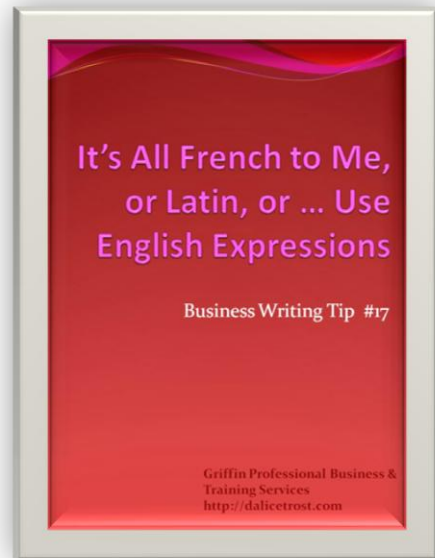
But of course it should not be. It should be English.

Avoid foreign phrases and jargon when you can think of a simple English equivalent.

Apart from the very common and widely accepted 'etc' it is best to avoid using foreign words in your writing. You are writing to be understood. You may be familiar with *déjà vu*, *comme il faut*, *inter alia*, *ad nauseam*, *et al.*, *ipso facto* and *objet trouvé*, but using these terms distances you from your reader.

Readers of English may once have commonly understood these expressions, but it is unrealistic in an age of global Business English to expect your readers to know what you're talking about. And you don't want to send them scurrying off for a dictionary every sentence, do you?

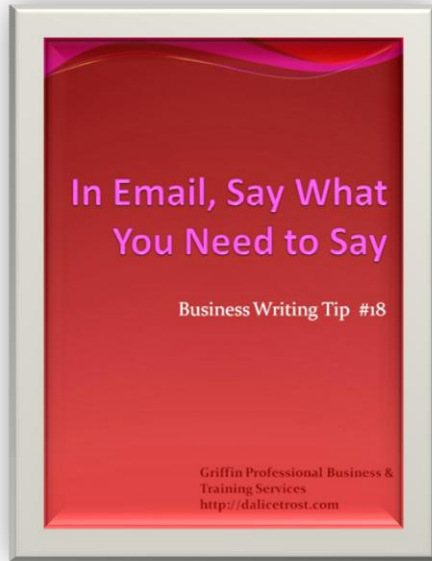
The same goes for jargon. You may diarise and prioritise; you may want your team to take a 'helicopter view' or 'get their ducks in a row'; a hospital patient may be told to ambulate or mobilise. But what is wrong with 'put this in your diary' and 'make this a priority'? Look at the overall situation, or make sure you are prepared? In hospital wouldn't it be far simpler to ask patients to walk or move about?



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## Tip #18

### In email, say what you need to say



In emails say what you need to say and move on.

Most people I know suffer from severe cases of email overload. I know people who have multiple email addresses, each of which gets maybe 20 or 30 separate emails each day. Some need action, some are for information, some are spam ...

You want people to read your email, not just 'trash' it.

You want to make it easy for people to read it, and you want to make it easy for them to know if they

need to do something and, if so, what they need to do.

### Two Top Tips for Email

#### 1. Make your subject line meaningful.

If it's about an upcoming committee meeting say that. For example:

- Agenda items for staff development c'tee meeting – 30 September – please read
- Need agenda items for October board meeting – submission date 15 September

If you are sending them something to read, say what and why

- Report – 1<sup>st</sup> quarter sales figures – for information
- October Board Meeting - agenda - submission date for papers
- First quarter sales figures - for information
- Interview report – executive secretary – read and discuss

#### 2. Put your main point in the first paragraph and use bullet points and short paragraphs to make it easy to read.

#### Example 1

Here are the agenda items for the staff development committee meeting. Please read them and let me know if you need further information before the meeting on 30 September.

I've:

- developed this list from the previous agenda and from comments a few people have made
- cleared it with the GM
- distributed it to all committee members and to the committee chair

### Example 2

The next board meeting is on October 5 2012 from 10.00 to 13.00. I have attached the draft agenda. Please:

- submit additional agenda items and supporting papers by 15 September
- email them to [myPA@xyzco.com](mailto:myPA@xyzco.com)

### Example 3

Here are the first quarter sales figures. Please read them.

You don't need to take action on anything, but you should be familiar with them, and with sales trends.

### Example 4

Here are the results of the interviews for the executive secretary position. I have made a recommendation (see summary at beginning of report):

- Please read the report and let's discuss it
- Wednesday afternoon is good for me. Let me know if you can make it then, or if we need to find another time

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## Tip #19

### Be Specific, Be Concrete

By spelling things out you make it easier for people to understand. You are also more credible.

If you find yourself writing something like, '**Funds have been set aside for the refurbishment of various assets**', ask yourself what you really mean, what it is that you're trying to say. Does this sentence mean anything at all? Look at the words and phrases.

- Funds – how much?
- Have been set aside – by whom? Who is footing the bill?
- Refurbishment – modernisation, replacement or a lick of paint?
- Various – which ones?
- Assets – what are they? Buildings, cars, photocopiers, printers?



Now look at this sentence:

**'The Sydney division of the company has set aside \$500,000 dollars to replace all the computing equipment and upgrade the photocopiers.'**

We now know exactly who is paying, what the budget is, and what it's for.

This tip is important when you're answering questions at job interviews.

Compare 'I supervised a team of ten with a budget of \$4 million and our sales increased by 30% year on year from 2005 to 2008' and 'I supervised a big team with a pretty good budget. Our sales increased every year'. Which example gives you more information, and coincidentally is also more credible. When you have numbers you can check facts.

Here are some other examples of specific and general words/phrases:

About	Relating to the situation regarding
Door	Entranceway
TV, radio	Broadcast media
Public transportation facilities	Trains, buses and trams
At 1500 hours	In the afternoon

Remember you want to make things easy for your reader. When you send an email, avoid using words like 'the current situation'. Your reader may be in the midst of 5 or 6 different 'current situations'. Be specific and spell it out.

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### Tip #20 Are you excited?

A short and simple tip.

Avoid using exclamation marks (or exclamation points if you are from the US).

It does not matter how excited you are. It does not matter how informal you are being. A string of exclamation marks immediately marks out your business writing as unprofessional.

When you want to convey excitement, use words. If you feel the situation really merits an exclamation mark (and I have yet to see a business situation that does), limit it to one.

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### About the Author



Dalice Trost is a freelance B2B copywriter, TEFL teacher and corporate training provider. She works with companies and individuals to ensure that they are communicating effectively in English. Her extensive network of experienced, proven international trainers in all aspects of business differentiates her from the crowd of corporate training providers. Visit her website at <http://dalicetrost.com> for details of the corporate training and business services she offers through her Prague based company, Griffin Professional Business & Training Services.

Dalice has worked in both the public and private sectors in Australia and the UAE, and is now enjoying European life in the Czech Republic. She spent more than 10 years working for a major B2B conference and training provider developing conference and training programs in just about all aspects of business. Her first Kindle ebook, *A Busy Person's Guide to Networking*, is available from Amazon. Follow @dalicejt on Twitter.

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