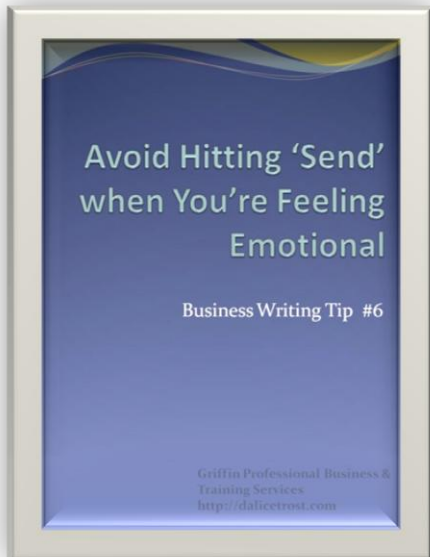


# Getting to Grips with Business Writing

## Business Writing Tips #6 – #10

### Tip #6

#### Avoid hitting 'send' when you're feeling emotional



This tip is about business communication rather than being strictly about 'business writing'. But it is about written business communication and it's important.

It may seem obvious but ...

If you're angry or upset when you're writing an email, wait for at least a couple of hours and review the content before you hit 'send'.

Email is, in most instances, an efficient way to communicate. But the very speed at which we can send

a message means that email can be risky.

We are used to dashing off a few words and hitting 'send'. It's all so quick and easy. But what happens if we are angry or upset when we 'dash off' our few words?

### **Tone**

Our word choice, our sentence length, our use of upper case letters – all of these create the tone of the email. Remember, most times when you receive an email you can't see the sender. You can't see if they're smiling, tense, nervous, upset, angry or anything else. All you see are the words.

When we write letters we usually prepare a draft, think about it carefully, measure our words. We are going to be putting them to paper and they are likely to end up on a file somewhere for a long time.

Somehow the quick, electronic nature of email lets us forget this. But it's important to remember. Your words are going to be read. If you write in anger, without taking the time to consider your response, when you hit 'send' that response is out there. You cannot get it back.

So take the time to distance yourself from whatever has angered you. Let a couple of hours go by, or wait until the next morning. Then reread your draft and decide whether to send it as it is, or whether to revise it.

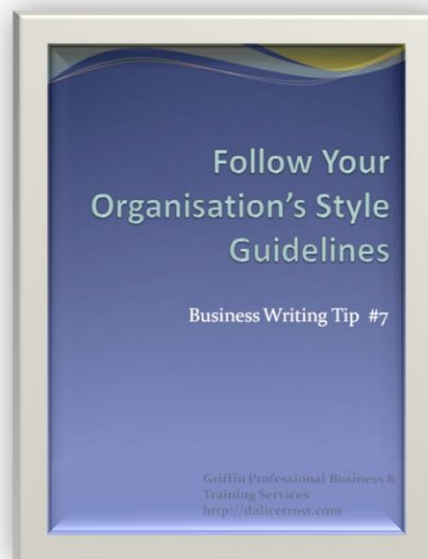
\*\*\*\*\*

### Tip #7

#### Follow your organisation's style guidelines

Take a look at the image below. It may seem exaggerated but, sadly, I have seen documents that have been formatted in a similar way.

This kind of poor formatting often rears its head in business. People decide that if two fonts are good in a document (one for headings, one for body text), then three or four, or even five, must be better. They combine bold, underlining and italics to create text that is difficult to read, oftentimes then deciding that all caps will show that what they have written is really important.



#### **POOR-FORMATTING-EXAMPLE-(main-heading)**

##### **Here's-the-first-heading**

Now-I-am-adding-some-body-text-to-illustrate-that-it-doesn't-have-to-all-be-bad-but-I-might-**EMPHASISE**-something-using-bolding,underliningand-all-caps-which-looks-quite-nasty.

I-will-put-in-two-paragraphs-I'm-trying-to-be-realistic-here-as-well-as-show-examples-of-what-not-to-do.

##### **Here's-the-second-heading**

In-the-second-section-we-might-have-some-subheadings.

##### **Subheading**

That's-not-too-bad-but-I-need-another-level-of-heading.

##### **Third-level-heading**

Now-it's-starting-to-look-very-messy-and-difficult-to-read.

Many organisations have style guidelines designed to make sure documents look clean and professional, and that their 'brand' is consistent.

If your organisation does not have style guidelines, think about creating some. Look at some documents that you think are well laid out and analyse their spacing, formatting, and use of white space. Also consider which version of English you are going to use and

how you are going to write numbers. Is it 'centre' or 'center', 'eleven' or '11'? Then document the style and use it for your own documents.

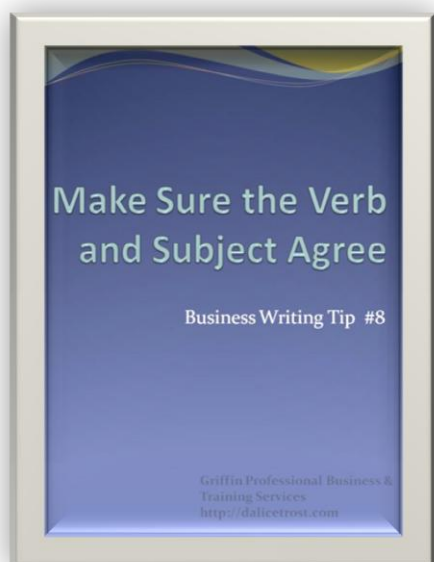
Major media organisations often have their style guidelines available online and they can be an excellent starting point for you so you don't have to develop guidelines from scratch.

Using a consistent style makes you look professional. The consistency becomes part of your brand image. Always remember that when you send something from work you are representing the organisation and its brand.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Tip #8

#### Make sure the verb and subject agree



Incorrect grammar can create an impression of laziness or not caring – not the image that you want to project in your business.

If your subject is plural, your verb must be plural too.

**Take care in the four following situations.**

**a. Two singular subjects – take a plural verb**

Often people make mistakes with this when they're speaking and nobody minds. But when it's written, get it wrong and it looks bad. The confusion comes because the verb follows a singular subject – but

there are two subjects so the verb has to be plural.

Alcohol and subsequent liver damage *have* taken their toll. (Not *has*.)

**b. A collective noun – a plural noun as part of a word cluster may confuse you**

A flock of birds *takes* off and flies over the lake. (*Birds* may be plural but the subject of the sentence is the collective noun *flock* which is singular.)

**c. There is or there are?**

Often we hear *there is* in speech when the correct version is *there are*.

For example, we hear people say, 'There's hundreds of people in front of me in the queue.' If you find yourself writing something like this, double-check it. It sounds natural but it should be, 'There are hundreds of people'.

### d. Pronouns that indicate an individual within a group take the singular verb form

- Nobody
- Someone
- Somebody
- Everybody
- Everyone
- Each
- Either
- Neither
- No one

So, 'Somebody from that section is coming to the meeting', or 'No one is coming' or 'Each of the words in the above list requires the singular verb form'.

\*\*\*\*\*

### Tip #9

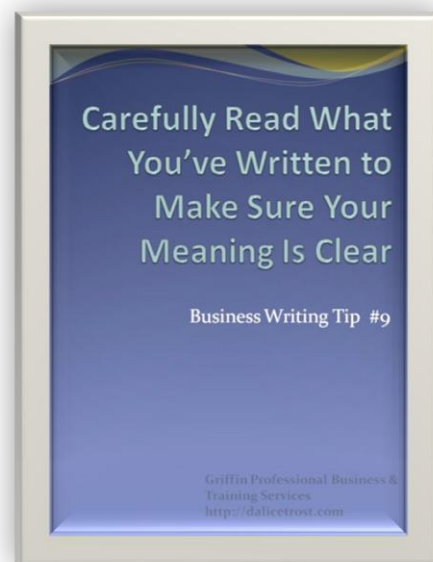
#### Carefully read what you've written to make sure your meaning is clear

I was just drafting the title for this tip and I'm glad I checked it. My first draft was, 'Read what you have written carefully to make sure your meaning is clear.'

Another great example, this one from *Funny English Errors and Insights* compiled by Troy Simpson – 'Never crumble your bread or roll in the soup'.

A few years back I saw a newspaper headline, 'Lack of facilities in schools to hit students'. It's a headline I'll never forget – an excellent example of how easy it is to write something that we don't really mean to write.

Word order and word choice are important. But, there are other aspects of the English language we need to consider when we are writing to make sure that our readers understand what we intended.



### Punctuation

You may have seen this story doing the rounds of Facebook.

An English professor wrote the words, “Woman without her man is nothing” on the blackboard and directed the students to punctuate it correctly.

The men wrote: “Woman, without her man, is nothing.”

The women wrote: “Woman: Without her, man is nothing.”

### Pronouns

Readers assume that a pronoun refers to the last noun mentioned. You need to make sure it does. I’ve taken this example from *The Little Green Grammar Book* by Mark Tredinnick.

A successful Hong Kong architect fell nineteen floors to his death with a friend as he tried to stop him committing suicide.

Read this carefully. It’s really not clear who was trying to stop whom.

### Dangling Modifiers

Tredinnick also has great examples that illustrate the confusion dangling modifiers can cause – and the unintentional humour.

We make recommendations for fixing all the problems in this report.

Read it carefully, then reword.

In this report, we make recommendations for fixing all these problems.

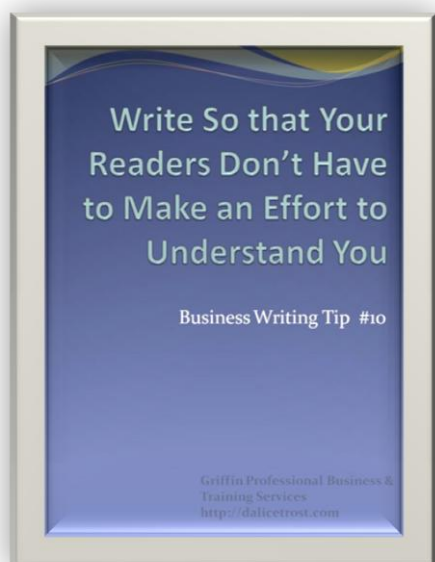
\*\*\*\*\*

### Tip #10

#### **Write so that your readers don’t have to make an effort to understand you**

When you write, usually you are writing for someone else to read it. Unless, of course, it's your personal journal. You want your reader to understand what you are writing. You want them to get the message. Make it easy for them.

- Use short words rather than long ones
- Make sure your writing follows a logical structure



## Getting to Grips with Business Writing

---

- Avoid long blocks of text – break it up with paragraphs and, where appropriate, headings and subheadings
- Use appropriate illustrations and diagrams to make the meaning clear
- Avoid the use of jargon unless you are absolutely sure that your reader understands it
- Avoid the use of officialise (for example, aforesaid, notwithstanding, etc.) Use everyday language
- Use prepositions carefully so it's clear who or what they refer to
- Use real examples rather than abstractions
- Keep your word order simple. Put the subject (doer) early in the sentence and follow it with the active voice verb whenever possible
- Cut unnecessary words – write 'now' instead of 'at this point in time'

When you've written something, before you send it, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I know who my reader is?
- Will my reader recognise the words I have used?
- Will they understand what I want them to do?
- Will they know when I want it done by?
- Will I get the results I need when they read this?

\*\*\*\*\*

### 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.

For more Business Writing Tips visit Dalice's blog at:

<http://dalicetrost.com/blog>