

Professional English, Inc.

Speaking, Writing, and Cultural Training

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Writing Emails that Inspire Action

By Dr. Maureen Archer

Even though email has replaced the memo and business letter as the primary means of written business communication, surprisingly few people know how to write an effective email message.

Many people still treat email as if it were a written phone call; they quickly type out their thoughts and push the send button. Here's an example of a hastily written message:

Subject: Meeting Next Week

**Decided to set up a meeting about the project.
Contact Barbara to see if they want to join us.
Please Paul about the data for Plan B.**

Tom

When Susan receives this message, she will need more information before she can act. For example, when and where will the meeting be held? What is the purpose of the meeting? Who is included in "they"? Which word is missing between "Please ____ Paul..."? Please tell Paul, or please ask Paul?

Tom knows all of this information, but he did not move it from his head to the screen. Therefore, instead of taking the actions Tom needs, Susan will need to contact him about the missing information. Time is lost and frustrations gained.

Here are several tips for writing email messages
(cont.)

Spotlight On... a Trainer



BILL GLOSE is a graduate of Virginia Tech, a former paratrooper, and a Gulf War veteran. He discovered a love for writing late in life, after journeying through several other careers—as an engineer, a soldier, and a factory supervisor and manager. He started writing in his spare time, but when it became

apparent that that wouldn't be enough, he walked away from a successful management position to dedicate his life to writing.

Bill started out as a technical writer, using his past military experience and engineering knowledge to create technical manuals and student guides for the Army. For three years he created and taught lessons to soldiers on newly developed digitized equipment for mechanized command posts.

Bill has been a featured speaker at the Ocracoke Writers' Retreat for the past three years and has taught writing workshops at The Virginia Festival of the Book, The Chesapeake Writing Conference, and many other events. During the past six years, over 250 of his articles and short stories have been published in four countries.

Why does Bill like being a Professional English coach and workshop presenter? "I enjoy watching other people blossom as writers. It gives me great pleasure to witness someone else's breakthroughs, whether it's getting past writer's block or learning how to plan and organize a document."

Bill is one of the nine trainers at Professional English.

that will clearly convey your meaning and inspire the recipient to act:

Give a Specific Subject Line

Spammers have gotten very good at mimicking weak subject lines, such as “Re: the meeting,” “Enjoyed lunch,” and “Need your report ASAP.” To prompt your reader to select your message out of the hundreds received that day, write clear, concise, pertinent subject lines. Here are some effective subject lines:

**What is John Miller’s email address?
More travel funds available (deadline 9/15)
Marsha, I have the data you need**

The reader should know instantly what the message is about. Asking a question in the subject line, giving details and deadlines, and using the recipient’s name ensures that readers will open (and not delete) your message.

State the Purpose of the Email in the First Sentence

There should be no suspense in business writing; readers should know why you are writing from the start of the message. By receiving the purpose first, readers begin with the “big picture,” which allows them to better comprehend and sort the message’s information.

Give Only the Details the Reader Needs

See “Dear Dr. A” for advice regarding this strategy. →

Include an Action Step at the End of the Message

Too often, an important component (the “action step”) is left out of email messages. The action step tells the reader what he or she needs to do next. Strong action steps give specific instructions with specific deadlines.

Here is a list of common **weak** action steps:
Please get back to me ASAP.
Send me the figures at your convenience.
Let’s discuss this next week.

Specifics will alert readers to your timetable and prompt them to respond. Here is a list of stronger action steps:

- **Please send me your results by Sept. 16.**
- **If you can’t meet from 10:00 – noon on Oct. 5, please suggest another meeting time by Friday.**
- **I’ll call you tomorrow to hear your ideas on this.**

By following these tips, you will help your reader better understand your message and take the action you want.

Dear Dr. A:

We offer many products and services, but I often struggle with the best way to describe them on our website and flyers. Can you recommend any strategies for presenting these details to potential clients?



**Miryan L.
Virginia Beach**

Dear Miryan:

Like all good writing, the text should focus on what the reader needs to know, not on what the writer wants to say. As a writer, you should get inside of your potential clients’ heads – think the way they think so you can provide the information they seek.

An excellent strategy for doing this is to ask, and then answer, the questions your clients have. These questions will change depending on the kinds of products and services you offer. Here’s an example:

Let’s say a dentist has a new cavity-filling procedure he wants to promote. Before writing the promotional materials, he should think of the questions his patients will have:

- 1) Does the new procedure cost more?
- 2) How is it better than the old procedure?
- 3) Will my insurance cover it?
- 4) How long will the procedure take?
- 5) What is the recovery time?
- 6) Does it hurt?

The dentist may be excited about the new technology and materials used, but most patients don’t care about these details. They want to know how it will benefit their health without draining their funds.

So it is best to start with your potential clients’ questions; address these concerns throughout your promotional materials, and you will reap the benefits of giving readers what they need.

Please send your communication questions to Dr. Maureen Archer (archer@allenglishtraining.com).

Would you like your staff to write better emails?
Ask about our popular half-day email workshop.