

Writing Tip: Avoid worn-out clichés in your opening sentence

Adapted from *Writing to Get Things Done*® seminar

Productivity Tip

To clearly communicate what needs to get done, avoid worn-out clichés in your opening sentence.

Give Readers What They Want

Readers scan most emails in 3-5 seconds looking for quick answers to the questions, “How does this email affect me? Do I have to do anything?” The farther the answers are from the opening sentence, the more difficult they are to find. So, give readers what they want—and answer these questions in your opening sentence.



Stan Berry

Avoid These Opening Phrases

Do you muddle your message by using any of these stuffy, worn-out phrases in your opening sentences?

Obvious expressions such as

- We are in receipt of your letter dated . . .
- We received your letter of . . .
- Attached for your reference, please find . . .
- Enclosed, please find . . .

Unnecessary expressions such as

- Per your email of . . .
- We wrote to you on . . .
- Our office would like to inform you . . .
- This email is for the purpose of . . .
- This email concerns . . .
- It has been brought to my attention that . . .
- In response to your email dated . . .
- In confirmation of our phone conversation . . .
- This is to verify our telephone conversation of . . .

How'd We Get to This Mess

If you use these phrases, you're not alone. Far too many people do. These phrases are nothing more than starting blocks for the Rambling Rose writing process, where people ramble as they type in the hope that something will get done. When writers learn to plan content around getting things done, they have no use for these worn-out clichés.

Despite that reality, most business professionals learn to use these phrases from several sources:

1. Following their supervisor's example. Some supervisors suggest using these phrases to show a paper trail—a way of linking past to present. However, this linking is preferably done in the subject line.
2. Taking an academic business writing class. Many writing classes teach a *when in Rome, do as the Romans* in this regard. These teachers miss the real purpose of these phrases—to give the writer a starting block to begin with background—something the reader is not interested in as yet.
3. Emulating what they see other people doing. Business professionals have been using these phrases forever. How can so many people be so wrong for so long? The answer again lies in the Rambling Rose writing process.

Before You Hit the Send Button

Replace these empty platitudes (for the reader, at least!) with what needs to get done in paragraph one. For some of you, this will be difficult—it's like saying good-bye to old friends. Think of it as opening a window for fresh air—to keep your opening sentence fresh, clear and vital!



Stan Berry has devoted the past 34 years to improving the writing skills of over 55,000 business and government professionals. After completing his Master's degree from Yale University, he co-authored five books on writing that he uses in his seminars. He's been a member of the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) since 1975 when he served as the newsletter editor and on the Board of Directors for the Twin Cities Chapter. Stan can be reached at www.BerryWritingGroup.com or 612-578-1487.



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