

Writing Tip: A Strategic Advantage that Begins at the Keyboard

Adapted from *Writing to Get Things Done*® seminar

When composing emails, you are much more productive if you think and write from the reader's perspective. This simple solution is easier said than done. An officer in charge of a U.S. Navy Shipbuilding facility calls this fundamental change a "force multiplier." He personally models this approach and coaches his staff to do the same – because the benefits are both immediate and significant.



Stan Berry

Be Aware of Your Natural Tendencies

Most people type their rambling thoughts as they think through what they want to say. Even professional writers do this because it feels natural to write as we think. This natural tendency is reinforced by our educational system, where we are taught make our case before getting to the point, e.g., introduction, body, conclusion.

By writing our rambling thoughts, we inundate readers with a stream of reasons and justifications that eventually lead to an action item, request, recommendation, or conclusion. In other words, the most important information is buried in the most difficult to find place, i.e., in the middle or at bottom of the email.

Step into Your Reader's Shoes

We've all been told to write for the reader. Yet few people really do or even know how. To best understand the reader's perspective, consider your own preferences. When reading emails, you want to know three things:

- How does this document affect me? Do I have to do anything?
- Why should I care?
- When do I need to do it?

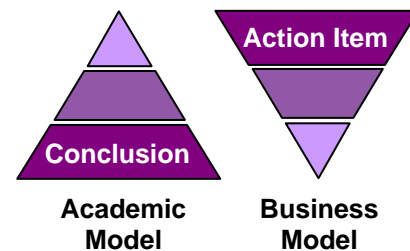
Put another way, you want the bottom-line up front, followed by supporting information, and the urgency. Yet as a writer, these needs clash with our natural tendency and a lifetime of schooling, cultural reinforcement, and habit. We are conditioned to make our case before getting to the point.

Make a Profound Paradigm Shift

Writing from the reader's perspective is common sense but not common practice. To make this profound paradigm shift, follow these five steps:

1. Put the Bottom Line Up Front.

The key to workplace productivity is to turn the academic model upside-down. That is, write from the reader's perspective by clearly stating what you want to get done in paragraph one. You can then make your case with supporting reasons, and respectfully conclude with a deadline, timeframe, or urgency.

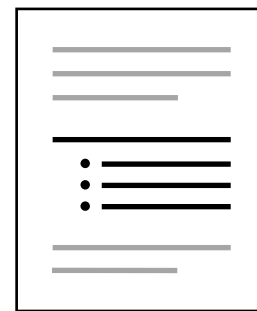


2. Support the Bottom Line with Key Points.

To strengthen your message, strategically place key points and supporting details *after* you state the bottom line. You can further increase clarity and understanding by listing your key points and supporting details. Here is an example of a bullet list that makes it easy for the reader – and writer:

The bullet-list format has three benefits for the reader:

- *Speed.* Lists are quick to read and write.
- *Comprehension.* Lists are easier to understand than flowing verbiage.
- *Retention.* Lists are easier to remember.



Three-Paragraph Model with a List

3. Tactfully Conclude by Communicating the Urgency.

Work environments are time driven, and without a deadline or sense of urgency, things don't get done. Create accountability by tying an action item to a deadline. To increase compliance, tactfully provide a supporting reason. For example:

"I would appreciate receiving your approval by Friday. This will give ample time to effectively plan our agenda for next week."

Without a deadline, time frame, or urgency, readers will wait for one. "We're pretty busy, but we'll get to it at some point down the road. (Whenever that is.)"

4. Forecast the Bottom Line in the Subject Line.

Even well written emails are unproductive if they are not read. Use a forecasting subject line to entice readers to learn more and take action. Forecasting subject lines communicate the bottom line so readers immediately know how your information affects them.

Effective subject lines offer more than a general topic description. Consider the following examples:

- "CVN 65 Topside TP AS21.1.1" [General topic description]
- "Recommendation to Disapprove Test Based on Discrepancies of CVN 65 Topside TP AS21.1.1" [Specific forecast of the bottom line]

Forecasting subject lines turn readers from passive to active by bringing them into paragraph one with an inquiring mind. This simple enhancement often determines whether your email gets read or not.

5. Finesse with Tone to Encourage Cooperation.

The last step before sending your message is to check your tone. Tone is that personal touch that compels readers to react positively or negatively. Setting an effective tone means communicating in a way that encourages cooperation and consideration.

Respect is the key to effective tone. When you hold the reader in high esteem, you stimulate positive feelings. Use friendly words like please, appreciate, glad, give, happy, help, good, and thank you. Keep your language positive and focused on what you want to get done. Which tone is more effective?

"We can't authorize your security badge until you send us your signed application form."

"We will be happy to authorize your security badge as soon as we receive your signed application form."

Like a boomerang, tone returns what you send out. Finesse your messages with tone to make it easy for your readers to say "yes."

Try It and See What Happens

In today's fast-paced work environment, employees don't have time to wade through stream-of-consciousness emails. Clear communication drives productivity. To inspire, direct, and gain cooperation from all levels of personnel, think and write from the reader's perspective using these five steps:

1. Put the bottom line up front.
2. Support your bottom line with key points.
3. Tactfully communicate the urgency.
4. Forecast the bottom line in the subject line.
5. Finesse with tone to encourage cooperation.

Though common sense, this approach is not common practice. Call it a strategic advantage that begins at the keyboard.



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