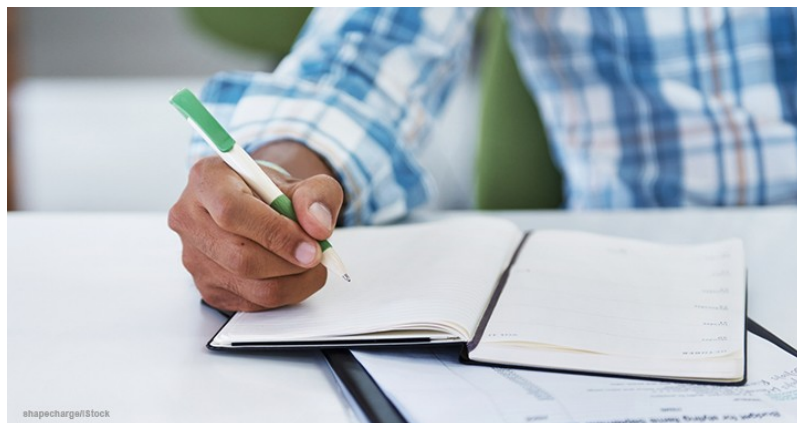


The bottom-line benefits of clear writing

Communicating with a human touch adds value to your expertise.

By John Sturtevant



Number cruncher. Bean counter. Ledger lover. You've likely heard them all. The oh-so-clever names for people who have mastered the enchanting world of numbers. But these days, a good part of the number crunching and bean counting is handled at lightning speed by computerized systems and automated processes.

So how do you provide exceptional value in the age of extraordinary automation? In part, by using clear writing to communicate the *why*, not just the *what*.

Automation allows accounting professionals to gather, process, and quantify vast amounts of data instantly. But it's knowing what to do with the data that adds a human touch only a financial professional can provide.

And that magic is essential to the criteria your readers use to make decisions. People are fundamentally emotional creatures. Although we're great at measuring, assessing, and analyzing, we all make decisions based primarily on what *feels* right, not just what adds up correctly.

Your ability to interpret disparate data and translate your findings into ideas others will understand is where you work your magic. Clear, persuasive writing helps you provide real value by turning information into knowledge to help people understand often complex ideas and make educated decisions.

That level of expertise, insight, and understanding builds trust and confidence. Those are human qualities even the most advanced technology can't offer.

An excellent way to begin your journey to clear writing is to ask yourself four simple questions:

Why am I writing?

We're taught it's important to fill up pages, impress people, and be right. Those goals will never result in clear writing. Nor will that approach give your readers what they need to make confident decisions.

Instead, define a specific objective for your report, proposal, letter, or email. Write a sentence like this, and stick it on your monitor to remind you why you're sitting there tapping on the keyboard:

After reading my report, business owners will make the budget adjustments I recommend.

Then, ask yourself: Do all my ideas support that goal? Am I giving my readers everything they need — and only what they need — to compel them to follow my suggestions? What are the critical elements I must include? What details can I omit that do not support my objective? How do I organize my document to give my readers context and present ideas in logical order?

Who are my readers?

You can identify benefits for your readers if you know who your readers are. Gather insight about how they think, what's important to them, and the criteria they use to make decisions. How well do they understand accounting principles? Are their priorities the same as yours?

For example, you may think the costs involved in a project are critical. But your manager is more concerned by how the project will affect productivity and collaboration among staff.

Give your readers everything they need to make required decisions, and leave out unnecessary details. If you focus on the criteria that are important to them, you'll be surprised at how responsive they become.

What do I want my readers to learn?

While you're organizing ideas to give your readers, keep in mind there's often a huge difference between what you think you need to tell someone and what they think they want to know. When we learn something, we not only get data, but we also understand what the data mean, how relevant they are to us, and how to use the information effectively.

By using words with intention to convey meaning, and identifying what to include and what to omit, you will help your readers understand information and know what to do with it.

Warren Buffett is an outstanding example of clarity in action. Buffett is a remarkably successful businessman. But what earns my respect even more is his ability to write clearly and persuasively. He writes what he means, and he knows what he wants his readers to learn.

In fact, Buffett's lucid style is one reason the US Securities and Exchange Commission asked him to write the preface to its *A Plain English Handbook*. To see an example of Buffett's style, here's how he translated a passage from a mutual fund prospectus into clear writing.

An excerpt of the original: *Maturity and duration management decisions are made in the context of an intermediate maturity orientation. The maturity structure of the portfolio is adjusted in anticipation of the cyclical interest rate changes.*

An excerpt of Warren Buffett's revision: *We will try to profit by correctly predicting future interest rates.*

Now that's a clear sentence. It's not simplistic — Buffett is not trying to dumb it down for us. Rather, he conveys clarity and honesty. Buffett's simple three-letter word *try* conveys trust. People know mutual fund investors won't *always* profit. And he knows they know that. So he writes what he means. He can't promise the fund will always succeed. But he can promise the fund managers will always *try*. You can't put a dollar amount on the value of that honest communication style.

What do I expect to accomplish?

If you want your readers to know what decisions to make, and why, you must first define that for yourself. Part of the specific objective I mentioned earlier includes your expected outcome. It's useful to remember that readers' perspectives are often different from ours. People we communicate with may not have the same understanding of our topic or assign it the same priority as we do. And our readers may interpret our words differently from the way we intend.

To help you be clear, avoid generalizations. Phrases like *as soon as possible* and *significant increase*, and similar vague terms will lead to confusion. Instead, use dates, times, locations, and other words that describe specific benefits, percentages, values, and expectations.

Instead of: *Please review attached and respond accordingly ASAP.*

Write: *Please take a look at the costs on page 7 and check that I show them accurately. The CFO asked me to send this report by 5pm today. So if you have changes, please email them to me before 3pm. Or, if the costs are correct, just reply to confirm that. Thanks.*

Give your readers not only the data, or the *what* of the action, but also describe the *why*, *how*, and *when*. That broader perspective gives your readers the context they need to understand ideas and make decisions.

That is where you have an advantage over technology and automation. By providing the human side of accounting and financial data, you make information relevant and meaningful to your readers. And by offering people your insight, you help them make decisions with a level of trust and confidence that's priceless.