

The Guide to Excellent Public Relations Writing

Writing is the most important skill you need to succeed in public relations.

For your benefit, I've compiled these tips to help improve your writing. Remember, writing is the clear expression of thought, and if you can write well, YOU CAN DO ANYTHING!

1. Know your target audience and write for that audience. Are you writing for blue collar workers? College graduates? High school graduates?
 - a. Think about appropriate word choices.
 - b. Think about adopting the right tone for each audience. For example, in the 2000 presidential election, George W. Bush adopted a down to earth style that he used to gain millions of votes in red states throughout the country... and ultimately win the election.
2. When you start to write, ask yourself: WHO CARES?
 - a. Include a benefit in the first paragraph.
 - b. Answer the question that the reader will ask: WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?
3. Know how public relations writing differs from the writing style you learned in high school and college English classes.

Academic Style

- a. Long sentences
- b. Long paragraphs – five to seven sentence paragraphs
- c. lengthy essays – 500 words
- d. learned vocabulary

PR Style

- a. Short sentences – about 17 words maximum
- b. short paragraphs – two to three sentences paragraphs
- c. economy of language – 100 words
- d. simple words

4. Before you write:

- a. Research the problem or assignment.
 - (1.) do some reading
 - (2.) interview experts or knowledgeable people
 - (3.) find out what you need to know
- b. Organize your notes

Try putting your notes on index cards. Arrange the cards on a large table, putting them in logical order. Now you can create your outline.

Once you've completed your research and created an outline, your writing task is 50% completed. Once you are properly prepared, the writing will come much more easily.

c. Picture the readers

- (1.) What do they want to know?
 - (2.) What will interest them?
 - (3.) What benefits will appeal to them?
- (Look familiar? I-A-B!)**

5. Choose words wisely:

a. Prefer specific words to general words

EXAMPLE: We have received several replies.

REVISED: We received seven replies.

EXAMPLE: We have added considerable space.

REVISED: We added 20,000 square feet.

b. Use short words for clarity

NOT:

endeavor

aggregate

optimum

impose parameters

at the present time

in the near future

BUT:

try

total

best

set limits

now

soon

c. Avoid jargon (technical language), triteness, clichés, overused metaphors or catch phrases

NOT:

revenue enhancement

negative career development

enclosed please find

it has been brought to my attention

head shrink

my ball and chain

my better half

BUT:

taxes

fired

here is

I learned

psychiatrist

husband / wife

husband / wife

d. Avoid very, which is vague

NOT:

very large

very small

BUT:

massive

tiny

6. Strong verbs invigorate your writing

- a. Use strong action verbs and avoid weak verbs
USE: Surge, heed, flow, gain, pry, snare, banish
AVOID: to be and its derivatives: am, are, is, was, were
- b. Write active sentences. Use Subject – Verb – Object sentence structure.
PASSIVE: The burglar was bitten by the dog.
ACTIVE: The dog bit the burglar.
PASSIVE: It was suggested by Bob that our meeting was productive.
ACTIVE: Bob suggested that our meeting generated good ideas.

7. Succinct sentences make your writing sizzle.

- a. Sentence length should average 17 words.
- b. Suspect that a sentence over 20 words long is too long.
- c. Vary your sentence length. Include rhythm in your writing.
- d. Put the subject and the verb at the beginning of the sentence so that the reader knows what the sentence is about.
- e. Avoid putting too many ideas in one sentence. Express only one idea in each sentence.

8. Pungent paragraphs perk up your prose.

- a. A paragraph is a group of sentences built on one idea.
- b. Connect paragraphs with strong transitions.

Suppose you were writing an essay on Babe Ruth, whom many experts consider to be the greatest baseball player of all time. You might write a paragraph about his hitting, including 60 home runs in one season of 154 games, a feat no one else has ever done, and his career home run total of 714 with the highest home run per at bat ratio ever. You want another paragraph about his pitching career in which he won 20 or more games for four years in a row, before he became a full-time outfielder. Here is your transition sentence:

Not only was Babe Ruth a great hitter but he was also a great pitcher.

Transitions connect paragraphs. Some examples:

Adding to, illustrating or extending a point: and, furthermore, also, or, nor, moreover, along with, similarly, for instance, for example, for one thing, for another thing, especially, altogether, undoubtedly, happily, glumly, sadly, earnestly.

Summarizing: at last, so, finally, all in all, hence, and so, therefore, consequently, in short, that meant that.

Established time: that day, that evening, the next morning, years later, now, then, usually, until, not until, afterward, later, eventually, meanwhile, finally, immediately, soon, no sooner, at once, frequently, not frequently, occasionally, never, rarely, always, sometimes, at last, thereafter.

Considering alternatives: of course, doubtless, while it may be argued that, even if, even though, to be sure, notwithstanding, certainly, granted that, no matter which, on the contrary, yet, however, but, still, notwithstanding, nevertheless, conversely, on the other hand, though, although, whereas, but whereas.

Linking cause and effect: as a result, because, that caused, that resulted in, the outcome, inevitably, that brought about, that produced, naturally, as a consequence, consequently, therefore.

Referring back: they, those, these, that, most, he, she, it, none, nobody, each, all, few, some, who, whom, many, not at one, all but two, everything except, except for, without exception.

Restricting and qualifying: provided, in case, in some cases, should, unless, less, if, when, not unless, occasionally, rarely, only if, even if, even though, in no case.

- c. Short paragraphs get people to read.
- d. Long paragraphs cut readership.
- e. Use entrance ramps (tabs) and exit ramps (right alignment) to show readers where to start and where to finish. Never use justified margins!
- f. Show the reader a benefit in the first paragraph.
EXAMPLE: We invite you to attend our restaurant for an exquisite meal at the lowest price.
- g. Get to the point. QUICKLY!

9. Rules for excellent writing:

- a. Prefer the simple word to the fancy word.
- b. Prefer nouns and verbs to adjectives and adverbs.
- c. Prefer picture nouns and action verbs. (The drama of the trial gripped the audience.)
Great writers show, they NEVER tell.
- d. Master S – V – O sentence structure.
- e. Vary sentence length.
- f. Put the words you want to emphasize at the beginning of the sentence.
- g. Use short paragraphs.
- h. Cut needless words.
- i. Use plain, conversational language.
- j. Write clearly, so that you cannot possibly be misunderstood.

10. Put rhythm in your writing

- a. Same length sentences bore readers.
- b. Vary sentence length. Include short (nine words or less), medium (10 to 14 words) and long sentences (15 to 22 words).
- c. Use short, sharp sentences for emphasis.
- d. Longer sentences provide facts and depth.

11. Grammar:

- a. Do not write sentence fragments
- b. Do not start sentences with conjunctions, such as but, and, for, so, yet.
- c. Do not write run-on sentences. EXAMPLE: I own a cat, his name is Felix. Revised: I own a cat. I named him Felix.
- d. Check for noun/pronoun singular/plural agreement... **THE NUMBER ONE MISTAKE FOUND IN TODAY'S STUDENTS' ASSIGNMENTS!**

WRONG: The company advertised their product.

RIGHT: The company advertised its product.

- e. Avoid dangling modifiers.

WRONG: Looking out the window, the train hit the car.

RIGHT: While looking out the window, I saw the train hit the car.

WRONG: After dropping 18 points, investors started to buy stocks.

RIGHT: After the stock market dropped 18 points, investors started to buy stocks.

WRONG: When put into the hospital, money may be a problem.

RIGHT: When a person is admitted to the hospital, the person may have a problem paying the bill.

- f. Check spelling. Microsoft Word will not catch all words.

EXAMPLE: He wrote the perfect resume. Microsoft Word will not catch resume...

The correct word is résumé – notice the e's have diacritic acute accent marks.

- g. Before using a comma, make sure you know a rule for using it.

12. Writing clarity: The Gunning Fog Index.

When using Microsoft Word (or other software word processors), always check your copy's grade level for reading ease. You can configure the main toolbar in Microsoft Word to check readability when you select the spell check.

However, if you can not configure your word processing software, or don't have access to a computer, use the Gunning Fog Index. The Gunning Fog Index presents a way to measure your writing's reading level. How it works:

- a. Select a writing sample.
- b. Count 100 words.
- c. Find the average number of words per sentence. (If the final sentence in the sample runs beyond 100th word, use more than 100 words for this step.)
- d. In the first 100 words, count the number of words that contain three or more syllables. (Don't count proper nouns, combinations of short words like bookkeeper or manpower, or verbs made into three syllables by adding -ed or -es.)
- e. Add the average number of words per sentence and the number of words containing three or more syllables. Multiply the sum by .4.
- f. The result tells you the grade level of the writing sample. Remember, the average person reads on about a ninth grade level.

13. Edit for perfection

- a. Let nothing satisfy you. Delete, revise, reword, rewrite.
- b. Proof read out loud, slowly, one word at a time. An additional technique is to read your copy from the end to the beginning, one word at a time. You can find punctuation errors with this technique.
- c. Does your copy answer the question, SO WHAT?
- d. Get rid of waste words.
- e. Does each paragraph deal with only one topic?
- f. Check sentence sense, punctuation and spelling.
- g. PROOF READ, PROOF READ, PROOF READ!