

7 DEADLY SINS OF BUSINESS WRITING

Today, all across Australia, perhaps millions of emails, letters, memos, and reports will be written. Many, if not most, will contain writing errors. It need not be so.

Writing is a craft, not a mysterious art to which only a few have access. It's a skill just like any other. If you view writing this way - as a practical, problem-solving skill - it will put you on a path of competency and eventual mastery.

Here are seven deadly sins to avoid in business correspondence.

1. Writing without a plan.

Good writing follows a logical plan that includes all the information the reader requires. Think this through beforehand. Use the journalist's six questions as a prompt: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?

2. Poorly organised material.

To gain and keep your reader's attention, you'll need to organise your material the way the *reader* thinks about it – not the way *you* think about it. If you're writing a letter of complaint, for instance, don't write a narrative of how the events unfolded. Tell the reader what the problem is, and how you would like them to fix it.

3. Poor organisation.

It's no use burying your most important point in a wordy paragraph full of irrelevant details. Clearly signal what the main topic is with a heading, then use sub-headings to signpost the way. Start with the most important point. End with a call to action.

4. Using bureaucratic jargon.

Stuffy, formal language belongs in the 19th century. Modern readers want you to use Plain English so that they don't have to spend time deciphering what you are trying to say.

5. Using too much filler.

Good writers, like good cooks, know that too much filler is unappetising. Replace wordy expressions with short, clear words. Instead of the phrase *of a confidential nature*, use *confidential*. Instead of *perform an analysis of*, use *analyse*.

6. Burying the action step.

Don't hide the most important part – what happens next. Readers need to know who will be doing what, and in what time frame. It works best if the action step comes at the end of the document.

7. Misusing words.

Some people get quite worked up if you use *affect* instead of *effect*, or *it's* (with an apostrophe) instead of *its*. Don't risk offending them. Purchase a copy of my book *How Much Can a Koala Bear? A Guide to Commonly Confused Words*, and refer to it when in doubt.