Business Writing That Persuades

Idea In Short

Business writing must tell a story, demonstrate competence, drive to insights and take a point of view. Writers who persuade without misleading build trust and accelerate decisions.

Writing Is a Superpower

Putting your thoughts on paper in an organized way pays massive dividends. If executives can learn quickly from your work and make smart decisions, you are winning. If the writing is a pleasure to read and reflect on, even better. Developing comfort and fluency for business writing will help you generate an incremental $1 million over the course of your career.

Your ability to make the complex simple, put things into buckets, create logical flow between ideas and convince with data is powerful. It also helps that the majority of people are bad at it. As one writer observed, writing is thinking on paper. When you write clearly, you think clearly, and when you think clearly, your recommendations carry weight. Executives gravitate toward consultants who can synthesize complexity into actionable prose.

1

Executives Are Busy and Impatient

Everyone is over-subscribed and frantic. Business executives have a high opportunity cost of time. The question of whether they have time for something is always present. Your boss does not have time for a book report or mediocre analyses. Likewise, your customers do not want to suffer through brochure-ware platitudes. Use less jargon. Do not be a consulting mailman. Have some guts and maintain a point of view.

Good business writing saves time. Clearly worded emails and memos cut through unnecessary complexity. The reader feels refreshed because you have done the thinking for them. You have done the research and explored the edges of the problem. You evaluated options and provided recommendations with confidence. This quality is rare and therefore valuable. Executives remember the writer who made their decision easier, and they return to that writer with bigger questions and larger budgets.

Tell a Story and Demonstrate Competence

If you only had 60 seconds, what would you say? What is this about? Why does it matter? What do you recommend? Do you believe in what you are saying? What are the next steps? Good business writing answers these questions efficiently and directly.

Know what you are talking about. Do the work and the research. Read industry analyst reports from Goldman Sachs, Deloitte and Jones Day. Identify the industry groups and understand their arguments for and against your case. Understand the economic drivers pushing supply and demand. Map the value chain including suppliers, buyers, complements and rivals. If you do not know the material as well as your client or boss, you are faking it.

2

Be Structured and Drive to Insights

Structure means the writing should be easy to follow. Use the executive summary to outline what you will say. Break the problem into buckets, explain each bucket and arrange them logically. If it is a PowerPoint, write great titles. Make sure the reader does not get lost.

Take the data and apply analytical alchemy to turn it into actionable insights. Data by itself is largely useless. Expect the customer or boss to ask the question so what after each argument. They are not being grumpy. They want you to finish your thought. Spell out the implications clearly. What will the customer get? What is in it for them?

Have a point of view that goes beyond summarizing data. What do you think? Is the recommendation worth the risk? Is more information necessary or is this confidence level sufficient? Have you worried about the problem more than the reader? Hold strong opinions, loosely held. Your point of view is what differentiates a consultant from a research assistant. Clients pay for judgment, not just analysis, and judgment requires taking a position even when the data is incomplete.

The most effective business writers understand their audience deeply. They anticipate objections before they arise and address them proactively. They know which details to include and which to relegate to appendices. This editorial judgment separates compelling deliverables from forgettable ones, and it comes only from practice and feedback.

Make It Easy to Say Yes and Do Not Mislead

Moving the ball requires more than intellect. It requires head, heart and hand. Motivate the reader to take action. Outline the next steps. Provide answers to their likely top 10 questions before they ask them. Making it easy to say yes is the difference between a memo that sits unread and one that drives decisions.

3

Misleading others is easy if you have no morals. Leave out half the details. Appeal to fears, prejudices and weaknesses. People are easily misled. The ethical writer takes a different path. Be accountable and take pride in client results, not just the analysis and the prettiness of the deliverable. If your client makes questionable decisions because of your analysis or methods, you share the blame. Doctors abide by the Hippocratic oath to do no harm. Investment professionals have a fiduciary responsibility. Will you put your signature on your work like a Chief Financial Officer (CFO) who signs financials after Sarbanes-Oxley?

Quantify the benefits and costs. What is the size of the prize? What are the potential EBITDA benefits? Are they one-time or ongoing? How realistic are the numbers? Vet your thinking with experts and build consensus with the client. Outline the assumptions and risks clearly. Valuation models depend entirely on assumptions, and the numbers you input swing the attractiveness of deals entirely. Your recommendations do not apply in perpetuity. Show what implementation looks like and whether you are willing to put consulting fees at risk. As a private equity partner once noted, firms gain more credibility when they tell clients not to do a deal.

When I first started consulting, it felt strange that clients hire people rather than firms. The short answer is yes, they hire the firm. The long answer is no, they hire you, the person with the face who wrote the proposal and persuaded the client to trust them. Clients do not pay consulting firms $1 million to look over their shoulder the whole time. They hired you because your proposal demonstrated credibility, hunger and professionalism. Be that good, do great work, and only then can you say you are that good.

- 1Persuasive Business Writing Guide
- 2Consulting Executive Summary Guide
- 3Executive Summary Slides Like McKinsey

Summary

People hire people, not firms. Business writing should persuade without over-promising or misleading. Show your logic, assumptions and options so executives can decide with confidence.