

Effective Written Communication for Mitigating Risk

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Introduction

Successful projects thrive on effective communication. A majority of claims and litigation against design firms continue to be driven by poor communication skills.

Avenues for written work have dramatically changed in recent years with the advent of email, twitter, wikis, blogs, discussion boards, and social media. This has caused a resurgence of written work. Communication in the workplace has changed with virtual teams spanning across a state, the country, and around the world. This has resulted in many working with people you may have never meet in person, or only meet occasionally at a company or industry events. Your main methods of communication now become by phone, conference calls, email, Skype, Face-Time or similar virtual communication tools.

Importance of Written Communication

Let's start by asking - how important is written communication? Bottom line, it is very important. Your professional abilities, attitude, and attention to detail are judged by the quality of the emails you write, proposals and promotional material developed, training provided, the presentations delivered, and documents created. Communication studies have shown that the effectiveness of verbal communication is judged based on body language and voice tone – approximately 90%. However, non-verbal, written communication relies completely on the written word. If a correspondence is not written well, it can be easily misunderstood and misinterpreted.

Many business and design professionals have little experience with writing effectively. While obtaining a business or architectural or engineering (A/E) degree, while certain amount of writing was required, effective writing is not stressed in these programs. Let's be honest - learning to write well was not the driving force for becoming a business or design professional. For many business and A/E professionals, effective writing has never been a major concern. However, you should know that based on increased trends in litigation, and constant pressures by clients on projects, a lack of writing skills is a greater handicap with every passing year. This is especially true for senior management, Principals and project manager (PM). Spending time to improve your writing skills can result in a marked improvement in your professional career as well as improving the firm's overall performance, client satisfaction rating and risk mitigating efforts. Here are eight tips to help improve your writing skills.

1. Know Your Audience

Your audience should be your compass. Keep in mind what you want the recipient to know narrows down the directions your writing should take. Knowing the purpose of your writing provides the sense of that direction. The style, tone, and vocabulary used should be in line with your audience and the reason for the writing. This is not just a matter of appropriateness and having effective content – it's about having the ability to communicate adeptly with different audiences.

2. Professional and Formal

There's a tendency to think of all business communication as formal, which isn't necessary or even very productive. Formal language is fine for proposals, contracts, legal documents, etc., but like jargon often becomes invisible, obscuring rather than revealing the real meaning of the communication. At the same time, remember that informal shouldn't mean unprofessional. Keep the personal comments, and gossip out of your business communications. Remember that many businesses are required by law to keep copies of all correspondence related to a project. Don't email, mail, or circulate anything that you wouldn't feel comfortable having read into the record in a public trial.

3. Content and Style

Create reader-friendly content by using commonly known, shorter words. Your aim is to communicate your point across as effortlessly and as quickly as possible. Avoid "hidden verbs" by being conscious of unnecessary nominalization; for example, instead of saying, "We'd love to be of assistance" say instead, "We'd love to assist you." The second sentence is more effective and customer-friendly, because it's direct, efficient, and comprehensible.

4. Clear and Concise

Your writing should be clear and succinct. Your audience should not have to browse through multiple report pages to get the information they need. Ironically, as written information becomes more important to the smooth functioning of any business, articles that use to be 2,000-are cut back to 500-word sketches. Use words sparingly and cutting out the florid prose, avoiding long, meandering sentences. This can be achieved by focusing on the following items:

- Stick to your subject matter
- Focus on facts
- Aim for clarity and avoid ambiguity
- Choose short words
- Avoid unnecessary adjectives and adverbs

5. Opinion from Facts

These two aspects of your communication should be clearly separated. Ensure the reader can tell with certainty when something is a fact, assumption or your viewpoint. This way you'll avoid misunderstandings and you'll keep your writing ambiguity-free.

6. Serving a Purpose

Each piece of business communication should serve a clear purpose. Make an effort to not divert from this purpose. If you're emailing a colleague with a follow-up email about a report due, don't include three other unrelated requests in the same email.

7. Formatting

Every piece of writing should be properly formatted to maximize efficiency. Use headlines, bullet points, numbering and other formatting features (bold, italics, different colors) to ensure the reader can skim and scan with ease through your text. However, do not overdo it – too many distracting elements will take the focus off the message you want to deliver. Whether it's an email, a report, or a presentation, formatting helps your writing become clear and user-friendly. Whenever possible, substitute text with visual presentations, graphics or charts.

8. Proofreading

As they say - write once, check twice. Your first draft should never be your final written product. This is especially important for a project proposal or report. It is crucial you review and edit it multiple times until you have created a respectable version. Ensure you check for syntactical, grammatical and typographical errors. It is helpful if you can have someone else proofread your written product as well. Running our document through an online spellchecker to catch common grammatical errors and misspellings is also recommended. However, spellcheckers cannot detect contextual spelling errors (e.g. if the misspelled word is a properly spelled different word, like their/they're, accept/except, right/write, here/hear). Spelling errors can best be avoided by improving your spelling skills using software like Ultimate Spelling.

Conclusion

It might seem like a lot of work, but it's worth it to focus on the above points and for polishing your writing skills. The benefits are many - you'll find it easier to communicate your thoughts and people will be more likely to understand your message. Your professional abilities, attitude, and attention to detail are judged by the quality of your communications. We should not forget, successful projects thrive on effective communication and is an excellent risk management tool. These are all very important points to remember before pressing the "Send" button.