

Good writing opens doors.

## business issues

# IMPROVE YOUR WRITING, IMPROVE YOUR BUSINESS

BY ANNE SCARLETT

**YOU MAY HAVE EXPERIENCED** one of the following three scenarios before.

Your colleague sends you a mediocre email correspondence about a co-selling opportunity. It contains minor grammatical and spelling errors, and most of the piece is written in the passive voice.

You open a sub-consultant's fee proposal to incorporate into your full-service package, and wince at its haphazard organization.

You review a highly anticipated written proposal from an IT firm to integrate your company's core technology systems—only to discover the proposed ideas are virtually impossible to decipher amidst the lengthy marketing babble.

When receiving less-than-adequate written materials, the reader has two choices: (1) Take the extra effort to tease out the message; or (2) Disengage and move on.

Good writing matters. Really. It helps you differentiate from another equally qualified firm. It captures your readers' attention to ensure they connect with your service offerings. It elevates your overall value.

Bad (even mediocre) writing is detrimental. Really. It can tarnish how others perceive your true areas of expertise. It is distracting, is off-putting, and requires work to digest.

But wait a second, you think. AEC professionals produce a tangible end product—often a physical environment—that clients ultimately see, feel and experience. Shouldn't the work speak for itself? Why should we get hung up on our writing skills?

The answer is simple. Prior to actual construction, we provide many deliverables (master plans, building programs, in-progress design schemes, community pitches, competition submissions and so on) that are primarily expressed through drawings, along with tight, thoughtfully crafted written explanations. Deliverables are included within our work product; our clients pay for all of these intermittent components.

The bottom line: Regardless of medium and purpose—fee proposal, email, report, design document, memo, letter, handwritten note, social media, press release, article, marketing collateral, you name it—the quality of your writing impacts your clients' perceptions of you and your firm's expertise.

---

The quality of your writing impacts your clients' perceptions of you and your firm's expertise.

---

How do you want prospects and clients to view you personally—as a consummate business development professional? An AEC thought leader? A technical dynamo? However you want to be seen, here are five actions to ensure that your writing enhances—rather than diminishes—your image.

**1. Climb into the brain of your audience.** Regardless of the type of business writing, it's essential to empathize with your readers. Morph into them—become them—by applying specific filters. This will help you punch holes in your content and message or to rework your delivery in terms of tone, language, sequence and length.

**Action:** Formally identify (write down!) logical audience filters. Examples: *Who am I? What must I do to achieve success in my role? What goal am I trying to accomplish? What challenges do I currently face? On what medium am I reading this piece—a computer, hard copy or mobile device? Will this piece inspire me, teach me or persuade me? Is it a worthwhile read? What else could I be*

**Anne Scarlett** is president of Scarlett Consulting, a Chicago-based company specializing in AEC-specific strategic marketing plans, marketing audits and coaching. She is also on the adjunct faculty of Columbia College of Chicago and DePaul University. She can be contacted via her website, [www.annescarlett.com](http://www.annescarlett.com).



*doing with my time right now?* Then review your work with an adjusted perspective.

**2. Cut, then cut some more.** “I didn’t have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.” At some point, we’ve all heard that famous Mark Twain quote. Composing a concise piece with a clear message requires meticulous proofreading, precision and a great deal of thought. Conversely, if we are not willing to give proper attention to our written work, then the result is an unstructured, sloppy piece. Our message becomes submerged in word muck.

**Action:** Challenge yourself to whittle each piece down by one-third. Set it aside. When reviewing it again, is your message fully intact? Can it breathe? Could you reduce it even further? Think about how you feel when you dramatically purge email accounts, computer folders or a file drawer. Condensing may be difficult, but it’s also liberating.

**3. Hone your writing mechanics.** I’m talking about the stuff we learn in grade school: grammar, spelling and punctuation. Do not rely solely upon your word processing software (e.g., Microsoft Word) to identify technical issues. We all know many errors slip right through the system. My personal go-to sources are Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu>) and [www.grammarbook.com](http://www.grammarbook.com). Or dust off that old standby *Elements of Style* (Strunk and White) from your college days.

**Action:** Locate these resources for easy access. You should also make time to read high-quality writing. (Maybe it’s time to allow yourself the luxury of pleasure reading!) This can improve your vocabulary as well as your writing mechanics. You’ll be surprised by how much!

**4. Make sure ghost writers write in your voice.** In a past role as business development director, I authored some sensitive internal correspondence on behalf of our firm’s president. He was pleased with my work. The problem? Weeks later, some internal folks asked me if I had written the pieces. Unfortunately, they recognized that the writ-

ing style was not fully aligned with our president’s style. This caused him to lose some credibility during an already tumultuous time. (Note: I should have known better! Live and learn.)

**Action:** Don’t slack off on this matter. Carefully review any work prepared by a ghost writer and ask yourself: Is this close to how I would personally do it? Would I be able to elaborate further in the same voice if I were questioned?

### **5. Recognize that all writing is not created equal.**

Your firm’s social media presence serves to tantalize readers with quick, simple teasers. Your fee proposals aim to clearly explain your customized approach, along with your firm’s methodologies, processes and deliverables. Your white papers and published articles educate readers on completely new—and often complex—content.

Each content type requires a unique approach and style. Successful writing in one form does not immediately translate into successful writing in another form. So even if you have earmarked terrific writers within your firm, make sure to individually assess each person’s specific written communication abilities. Here’s a parallel in the AEC industry: A brilliant core-and-shell architect may not be able to create an interior environment with the same ease, proficiency and finesse as a trained interior designer.

**Action:** Match the right kind of writer with the given task. Further, when preparing a high-profile report, white paper, opinion piece, etc., don’t hesitate to hire a writing consultant to help you shape and express your message in a manner that best suits your target audience. It’s a prudent investment.

If your readers cannot easily grasp your message within your written communications, then your amazing ideas and insights will not get the attention they truly deserve. Further, you will not put forth your very best professional self. And that—on every level, ranging from initial business development through project delivery—would be a real shame. ■

---

Make time to read  
high-quality writing, which can  
improve your vocabulary  
as well as your writing mechanics.  
You’ll be surprised by how much!

---