



## Writing Documentation

Effective writing is a key communication medium<sup>1</sup> for all aspects of project management ranging from formal contract documents, through meeting minutes and instructions to quick emails. There are several universal rules for effective business writing:

### Focus the document:

One document one purpose - focus purely on the topic.

- Define your aim. Know precisely why you are writing the document and what you expect to achieve in the mind of the reader.
- Define your audience and write for them, you are writing for an objective, keep this reason firmly in mind. Set the 'tone' of the document to match the prior knowledge, attitude and preferences of the audience.
- Plan the content, list your sub-topics and stick to them. If you need to go off topic, then put the content in an Appendix or another document and reference it.

### Make it flow:

Start with an introduction or executive summary that overviews the topic, tells the reader what they are going to learn and outlines the structure of the document. Then write the main body of the document and end with a conclusion or action list/recommended actions.

Write your document so that each section flows from one sub-topic to the next. This way, the user never has to pause to work out where they are. So before you finish each section, introduce the next section.

### Have a clear structure:

Think carefully about your Table of Contents, it should be simple and easy to understand. Your readers need to be able to scan the Table of Contents to get a quick feel for what your document contains.

### Write clearly:

- Keep it simple!
- Use short sentences and paragraphs
- Avoid surplus content, clutter and jargon and write in simple, plain terms that everyone understands – all acronyms need to be explained
- Use bulleted lists to highlight points
- Use tables to make data easier to read they are easily scanned
- Insert diagrams to explain difficult topics
- Avoid gender-specific language and excessive abbreviations.
- Minimise the use of outlining and indents (where required try to avoid more than 3 levels of outline and used standard styles for the headings and contents
- Make appropriate (limited) use of bolding, italics and underlining<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more on communication theory see:

[http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1066\\_Communication\\_Theory.pdf](http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1066_Communication_Theory.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> For more on effective page layout see: [http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1065\\_Page\\_Layout.pdf](http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1065_Page_Layout.pdf)



- Check your spelling (spell checkers are not enough: to, two and tow are all correct spellings but change the meaning of a sentence).

## Understand and use punctuation wisely:

Quotation marks mean someone is “talking” they are used for recording the words spoken by a person and occasionally for identifying citations and titles. Single inverted commas are only used for ‘unusual’ uses of a word. Highlighting is best achieved by italicising or bolding text.

English and American punctuation rules are different – Australia tends to use UK punctuation.

- See more on UK rules at: <http://www.examples-help.org.uk/punctuation/index.htm>
- See more on USA rules at: <http://www.englishclub.com/writing/punctuation.htm>

## Allow adequate time:

Don't write in a hurry. Every document benefits from review and revision. Allow as long as possible between the first draft and the first review, ideally 2 or 3 days but at least overnight. Important documents benefit from 2 or 3 revisions with a space of several hours between each. A ‘second pair of eyes’ helps, you will be amazed at how many things a good proof reader finds after you have fully revised and edited the text.

## Conclusion:

Include just the right amount of information! Keep the document short and focused, but informative and helpful.

**KISS** - keep it sweet and simple.

## 10 Additional tips for Emails:

1. **Be specific.** Keep emails short and to the point to maximise the chance that they are read and lessen the chance that the reader will press "delete" without reading to the end.
2. **Be Prompt.** Respond within a day or two after an email is sent shows you care about the message and the sender. Even if you are not able to attend to something right away, telling the person when you will act on it shows professionalism and attentiveness.
3. **Use a clear subject line.** Everyone receives a huge amount of email and needs an easy way to know whether to open the email, where to file it, and which ones need action.
4. **Use the subject line to signal urgency.** Wording such as ‘response needed’ or ‘urgent’ conveys what is expected and by when; ie, ‘Client contract - confirming dates - response needed’, or, ‘Board meeting - draft agenda - response needed by Tonight’.
5. **One topic per email.** Limit requests or important news to one subject per email. This allows your subject line to reflect your message, and your reader will know where to file it and how to address it (at a glance).
6. **Minimise CCs.** Decide carefully who should be CC'ed on each email. Do not "reply all" unless everyone needs to be included in the reply! Often sending a response to the sender is enough and it helps minimise clutter for others.
7. **Minimize visual embellishments.** The use of CAPS LOCK or **bold** to highlight words can be misunderstood. Although highly visual people love playing with visual cues, they can be misunderstood by others. In order to minimize sounding "loud" (often associated with CAPS LOCK) or annoyed (often associated with bold), just use regular font styles; it's safer.
8. **Include a complete email signature.** It is helpful to have all one's contact information clearly and easily accessible so readers of your email can contact you in the most effective way for them.



## White Paper

9. **Avoid forwarding jokes.** Most people don't appreciate this type of email. Confine work email to your work and avoid non work-related material
10. **Pick up the phone.** If there's a conflict or misunderstanding talk to the person. Your automatic reaction may be to send a quick email back, especially if someone has misunderstood something in your email, but this is not advisable. Email is the worst method of conflict resolution and can exacerbate a bad situation.

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For more on the **Stakeholder Circle®** including White Papers, Published Papers and books, see:  
<http://www.stakeholdermapping.com/>