



LOST FOR WORDS

Is your prose good enough to make Shakespeare weep or could a Dalek have drafted your reports? Peter Bartram offers some tips on brushing up your business writing



“Am I speaking your language?” If you have ever used that colloquialism to anybody, it’s probably been for one of two reasons. Either you were hoping they’d agree with your point of view. Or you were talking to somebody who you felt might not have understood what you were saying.

And the fact is that finance professionals often do speak their own language – one thickly encrusted with jargon and concepts that other managers, let alone ordinary members of the public, may not understand. The problem becomes worse in written communications.

Here is a finance professional offering some no doubt wise advice: “The requirement that deductibility is contingent on expenditure being incurred for the purpose of gaining or producing assessable income is common to the provisions relating to both registration and other expenditure.”

Perhaps you can feel your eyes already glazing over, but it goes on.

“It does not mean that there must be assessable income arising from the business. All that is required is that the business must be put to use for the ultimate objective of producing assessable income. However, where expenditure is incurred for purposes that include the purpose of producing assessable income, deductibility will only be to the extent that producing assessable income is the purpose for incurring expenditure.”

Got that?

As a trained finance professional, you could probably find your way to the centre of this verbal maze given enough time. But that’s not the point. The reader for whom it was intended couldn’t. He’d asked for advice and after he’d read this, he was no wiser.

We’re all agreed that finance professionals are hot stuff when it comes to handling numbers. The trouble is that, when it comes to writing, some of them are lost for words. The result is emails, letters, memos – even whole reports – which read as though they’ve been written by a Dalek.

But bad writing is bad business. Partly, that’s because the writing is the business. When you send a proposal to another manager, a letter of appointment to a prospective employee, or even an email apologising for a mistake, the words define your intentions. If the words are unclear, so are your intentions.

But bad writing is also bad for business because it gives a poor impression. When customers, suppliers or partners read something that is badly written, they can be forgiven for asking themselves: “Should I be doing business with these people?”

So it's not surprising that many finance professionals want to raise the standard of their written output. But that's not easy at a time when there are claims that general standards of literacy are lower than they have been for many years – and falling.

After it had looked into the question of national literacy, the House of Commons' Public Accounts Committee published a report (*Skills for Life*), which revealed that 12 million employees have literacy abilities that are no better than those of 11-year-olds. "The low level of literacy and numeracy in the adult population is bad for national productivity and bad for those individuals who may struggle to cope with work and daily living," noted Edward Leigh MP.

But what many who study the business literacy question fail to take into account

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is that the widespread use of computers has changed in a subtle, but important, way how people write. When people used pen and ink or typewriters, it was difficult and time-consuming to make changes. You had to rewrite a whole page or type a new document. So you thought carefully about what you were going to write before putting it down on paper.

Writing on screen is a different kind of creative process. Instead of working out in your mind what you want to say before committing it to words, you try it out on screen, knowing it's easy to change if you don't like it.

As a result, you can work faster, using the screen as though it were an extra lobe of your brain. You can put your first thoughts down, rather than your second, knowing that it's almost as easy to change them on screen as in your mind.

That's fine, if you improve your draft in the light of your second, or third, thoughts. But if you work in a busy office with the in-tray full and the next job pressing – and which of us doesn't? – there is a danger you could let the first thoughts stand. So writing on screen can produce a 'good-enough' approach. And the problem is that, too often, what's deemed 'good enough', isn't.

There is no easy way to raise the standards of workplace writing short of finance professionals and their support staff working hard to raise their own game. They could do

worse than apply a simple six-step approach when they have to write something.

First, think. Ask four simple questions about what you have to write. Why do I need to write this? What is the most appropriate form for it, ie a letter, memo or report? Who am I writing it for? And what information will they expect me to provide?

Second, gather information. It's much easier to write clearly if you have a solid grasp of all the information you need before you start pounding your keyboard.

Third, plan. It's worth spending a moment planning what you intend to write even if it's only a brief email. With longer writing assignments, such as reports, planning enables you to define the overall structure of your document.

Fourth, write. Use plain English words rather than jargon. Generally, keep

sentences short – although you should vary their length to improve readability. Write in direct rather than indirect English. For example, 'I've sent you the budget report' is easier to understand than 'the budget report has been sent to you by me'.

Fifth, review. Read through what you've written to make sure you've given all the information your readers will expect. Look at what you've written from their point of view. Will they understand what you've written or will they be confused by jargon or technical terms?

Sixth, revise. Taking time to improve a document often delivers exponential benefits in readability. That's because you should improve the very parts that would otherwise cause a reader difficulties.

It's no use pretending great business writing is easy. It requires commitment, a desire to learn and a willingness to accept constructive criticism. But with those three, there is no reason why any finance professional should be lost for words. ♡

Writer and journalist **Peter Bartram** is the author of 23 books, several on writing and business communication. His latest book is *The Quick Guide to Great Business Writing*, published on Amazon Kindle as an e-book and by Smashwords in other e-reader formats



TOP FIVE MISTAKES IN WORKPLACE WRITING

❶ **The roving pronoun.** 'Mr Brown has discussed the paperwork with Mr Smith and he will deal with it.' Who is 'he'? Brown or Smith? If it's Brown, write 'Mr Brown has discussed the paperwork with Mr Smith and will deal with it.' If Smith, 'Mr Brown has discussed the paperwork with Mr Smith who will deal with it.'

❷ **Subject-verb confusion.** 'The budget shows sales are falling and has not risen since the beginning of the year.' Because it's the sales that have not risen – not the budget – the verb needs to be plural, 'have' not 'has'.

❸ **Word order muddle.** 'The managing director was asked to deal with petty theft in the office by the board of directors.' Kleptomaniac directors? Not on this occasion. The sentence should read: 'The managing director was asked by the board of directors to deal with petty theft in the office.'

❹ **The 'I's have it.** 'Mrs Snipe and me will be going to the meeting.' When you're the subject of the sentence, you should be 'I'. When you're the object of the sentence, you should be 'me'.

❺ **Aberrant apostrophes.** Once a rarity, now a plague in sentences such as: 'The 1990's were the year's in which several businesses felt the recessions impact on their sale's.' Every apostrophe is wrong. But there should be one between the 'n' and 's' of 'recessions'.