

Unfortunately, Bartholomew had written, "they was" once too often.

A Writing Report Card

Don't let poor writing skills speak badly of your company. Pinpoint them precisely with this practical tool.

By GARY BLAKE

At a New York brokerage firm, more than 100 managers in a recent survey were shown two memos; same message, different styles. One of the memos used wordy, stuffy phrases such as "at this point in time" and "initiate a modification." The other memo was concise. More than 66 percent of the managers judged the wordy memo to be "more professional," yet 95 percent confessed that they'd rather receive the concise one.

Discovering who needs writing skill improvement, and measuring a writing course's effectiveness are good reasons for having a systematic method to categorize particular writing problems. This

evaluation—a "writing report card"—gives you a chance to rate, as objectively as possible, a person's skill level in each of 20 critical writing areas. It may be used by a training director, outside consultant, or supervisor who is unhappy with the quality of writing but doesn't know why. And because the report card has been designed to evaluate the writing skills of everyone from clerk to company president, it may also be used to perform a company-wide assessment.

By rating each writer on a 1 to 5 scale in each of 20 categories, we can arrive at a number to show the relative skills among individuals, among departments—or even among companies.

Admittedly, any such writing evaluation is fraught with dangers. The evaluation certainly will be prejudiced by the whims of individual graders. Some people will

want to substitute categories. Some may feel that a few categories aren't important to the type of writing that is done in their organization. But, even with these caveats, the writing report card can be a helpful tool for evaluating the level of writing within an organization, determining who should attend a writing course, and measuring how well they do after the course.

Look for quality

To pin down the overall quality of a particular writer, make a 1 to 5 evaluation of the writer's level of accomplishment in the following areas:

Organization. Score 5 for a high sense of organization, and 1 for a complete lack of it. Organized writers quickly get to the point. Well-organized writers often use subheads to help keep the reader on track and to make the document easy to scan.

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While poor writers usually wander from point to point, organized writers recognize that writing is a three-step process: organizing, writing, and editing. They give the reader a road map.

Conciseness. A "5" makes his or her point with the fewest words possible (e.g., "usually" instead of "in the majority of instances"); a "1" uses three words where one will do. Concise writers make each word count. Most letters, for example, are kept to one page. It's almost impossible to prune a word from a "5."

Getting To The Point. Most writers take too long to get to the point. They start with a lengthy review of background information. Score a 5 for writers who usually get to the point in the first paragraph. And score progressively lower for people who bury their main ideas somewhere in the middle or end of a document. In persuasive writing, however, good writers say what the reader needs before discussing a way to meet those needs. The point—what the *writer* needs or wants to do—may appear later.

Sentence Length. Most people err on the side of length. Generally, if you can't complete a sentence without taking a breath, it's probably too long. Knock off points, too, if the writer includes too many choppy sentences (12 words or less) that don't provide links necessary for understanding related thoughts. Typical sentences should run from 15 to 25 words. Writers should lose points if they customarily clog introductory clauses with too many thoughts.

Paragraph Length. Is the writer sensitive to keeping his or her paragraphs short? Or does the writer overwhelm the reader with too many lengthy (more than 12 lines) paragraphs? To score 5, a writer has to show sensitivity to paragraph length, making sure that paragraphs of more than 12 lines are not placed at the beginning of a document, where the reader needs to be courted into reading on.

Redundancy. Does the writer repeat ideas instead of elaborating on them? Does the writer fall into using redundancies such as "consensus of opinion," "plan ahead," "very unique," or "end result"? Even excellent writers can fall prey to subtle redundancies such as "IRA account," "safe haven," "chemotherapy treatment," or "tuition fees." But a 5 avoids these, using only words that add new meaning.

Phrasing. When you read the words, does phrasing sound convoluted or smooth? Does it sound eloquent or does it fall flat instead? Deduct points if the

writer slips into such antiquated phrases as "enclosed please find," "under separate cover," "pursuant to your request," "please do not hesitate to call," "kindly," "herewith," or "I remain . . ."

Word Length. The simpler the words, the higher the score. Good writers want to express, not impress. They don't use big words when small ones will do. Does the author write "use" instead of "utilize"? "Total" instead of "aggregate"? "Best" instead of "optimum"? Reward simplicity.

Hedging. To get a 5 in this category, a writer must write authoritatively. A writer who hedges—often using words such as "perhaps," "maybe," and "seems"—is afraid to state things in a definite way. Another example: "It has been recommended." Who recommended it, and why doesn't the writer say so?



Whenever her sister began, "It has come to my attention that . . .," Gwendolyn wondered where the tattler hid.

Passive Language. Hedging and passive language are close friends. The writer relies on passive constructions such as "it is believed" (instead of "I believe") or "a decision was made" (instead of "I decided . . ."). The more tentative the writing, the lower the score.

Persuasiveness. Writers who earn 5s in this category make compelling arguments for their beliefs, appealing to the interests

of the reader before making a case for themselves. They close their messages with a strong call for action. No "If you concur, please let me know" for them. Instead, they write, "I'll call you next week to discuss this further." Weak writers try to compel their readers to do what they want with weak, annoying phrases such as "thanking you in advance for your cooperation."

Tone. A writer's tone should fit the situation, the attitude of the reader, and the subject matter. Good writers dwell on the positive, looking for ways to change a bad situation instead of clobbering people for what they've done in the past. Most good writers avoid a stuffy, front-office tone, opting instead for a conversational style that reflects the brightest, most colorful aspects of the way we speak. Score a 1 for any writer who hides his or her personality under a heap of formalities such as "pursuant to your request," "thanking you in advance," "yours of the 26th," "I trust," or "Please note."

Spelling. Andrew Jackson once said, "It's a damn poor mind that can think of only one way to spell a word." Even good spellers miss the difficult ones—"privilege," "accommodate," or "supersede," for instance. Midlevel spellers are stumped by words like "embarrass," "disappoint," or "benefited." Poor spellers have trouble with the likes of "written," "describe," and "personnel." Score a 5 if the writing sample you're reviewing is free of spelling errors. Score 1 if there are more than two spelling errors per page.

Capitalization. Poor writers over-capitalize and are unsure as to which words truly deserve capital letters. Take a point off each time you see a capitalization mistake. Good writers don't capitalize for emphasis; take points off if the writing sample uses capitals when underlining is appropriate.

Punctuation. Even excellent writers will make an occasional mistake with commas, hyphens, or apostrophes. Midlevel writers are often confused about when to use semicolons. Poor writers use commas arbitrarily, often forgetting to put them at the end of introductory clauses. Deduct points for each gross error such as confusing "it's" and "its" or linking two independent clauses with a comma.

Grammar. Give a 5 to the writer who correctly uses modifiers, maintains subject-verb agreement, and selects proper tenses. Give a 1 to anyone who uses "myself" when it should be "me," and who is unsure of which tense is correct.

Format. Score a 5 if the writing sample is centered on the page, has ample white space (wide margins) and if its format is appealing to the eye. When necessary, good writers use subheads and underlining, and know how the inside address of a letter should look. Give a 1 to the memo that lacks a "Subject" line.

Specificity. Reward colorful, concrete language with a 5. Deduct points for murky or general words or phrases like "as soon as possible," "nice," "interesting," "at your earliest convenience," or "I look forward to hearing from you in the near future."

Word Choice. Does the person mean to write "uninterested" instead of "disinterested"? "Invariably" instead of "inevitably"? "Farther" instead of "further"? A 5 knows the difference between "eager" and "anxious," "affect" and "effect," "continual" and "continuous." A 1 chooses the word "hopefully" instead of "I hope," and might write, "He makes \$20,000 a year" instead of "He earns \$20,000 a year." Deduct points for the use of such ugly words as "prioritize," "strategize," and "finalize," and for anyone who uses "ir-regardless."

Overall Care. Score a 5 for the writer who keeps things parallel (e.g., clustering items in a list, starting procedures with verbs, staying with a chosen format such as numbers or bullets) and proofreads carefully.

Once you've assessed the overall quality of your company's writing, and decided what to do with the people who need help, you might use the writing report card in recruitment, to make sure that the people your company hires are up to the high standard you've already set.

Rating the Writing

- 90-100—Superb
- 80-89—Excellent
- 70-79—Very Good
- 60-69—Good
- 50-59—Fair

Below 50—probably in immediate need of a writing class. Writers at this level are hurting the image of your organization, and the writing probably results in errors that cost both time and money.



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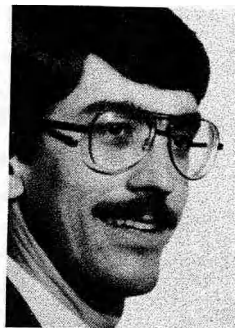
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