

Make It Stick

*Activity Pack*

Business Writing Essentials for the Modern Workplace

 **Helping lessons learned through training become part of *how we work*.**

**To the Learner Leader…**

This suite of activities has been designed to reinforce the key learning from the **Business Writing Essentials** course. They have been designed to be led by team leaders or designated trainers and do not require training experience, though for best results we recommend that whoever is leading the activities understands the principles of adult learning and has some experience in leading learning activities.

The suite of activities will provide you with up to six months of learning reinforcement. We recommend that an activity is run each month following the Business Writing Essentials course.

When running each activity:

* Ask the group to reflect back on the original course they attended:
	+ What takeaways did they have?
	+ What have they tried to implement?
	+ When revisiting some of these activities for a second time, ask them what additional ideas or thoughts they have in applying the concepts and tools in the activities to their job.

Each activity will take 10-15 minutes to run depending on the size of the group.

There is one activity to a page. Each activity has a brief introduction followed by instructions for the trainer.

We suggest the following to optimise your learning experience:

* Have the group meet away from their normal workspace
* Make sure mobile devices are switched off so that everyone fully engages
* Make the environment ‘safe’ and encourage everyone to contribute
* Run these activities with everyone standing – try running them outdoors in the fresh air
* Have other team members take the lead and run an activity – this will build confidence and leadership skills
* Don’t be afraid to improvise – the learning needs to be about you and your group so make it meaningful
* When debriefing an activity, get the group to reflect on what the activity means for them and what they will do differently or continue to do that underscores the learning points from the activity

**Activities in this pack**

1. Active vs Passive Voice
2. Pronouns
3. Making the reader care
4. Writing concisely
5. Changing the tone
6. Management speak

**Activity 1: Active vs Passive Voice**

**Introduction**

When you write you do so for one or more reasons, and you want your readers to take some sort of action. Your language needs to engage and commit your readers to your writing goal. Your sentences need to be concise and clear. The best way to achieve this is to write in what is called ‘active’ voice which is subject-verb order and not verb-subject order.

For example, “Mike writes a report” is subject-verb-object. ‘Mike’ is the subject and ‘writes’ is the verb and ‘report’ is the object.

“A report is written by Mike” is object-verb-subject. It takes more effort for your brain to make sense of the second sentence.

**Instructions**

Ask the group to re-write the following passive sentences in active voice. The ‘active’ voice sentence is listed in the right-hand column.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Passive** | **Active** |
| 1.The report will be reviewed by the supervisor before it is sent to the manager. | The supervisor will review the report before it is sent to the manager. |
| 2. Errors were found in the self-audit, but steps have been taken to correct them. | The self-audit found errors. These errors are being corrected. |
| 3. If you have questions, I can be reached by phone or email. | Contact me by phone or email if you have any questions. |
| 4. The current status report has been attached, and I have highlighted the important figures. | I have highlighted the important figures in the attached report. |
| 5. Not before the survey responses have been collected and tabulated will it be possible to know the opinions of our employees. | The opinions of our employees will be known after the survey responses have been collected and tabulated. |
| 6. If most of the opinions expressed by the survey respondents are negative, then more research may be needed before we can proceed with the project. | The project may be delayed, and more research may be needed if most of the opinions expressed in the survey are negative. |
| 7. The recommended guidelines for replacing equipment should be followed. | Please follow the recommended guidelines for replacing equipment. |
| 8. According to the customer service representative, reshipment of these items will be considered when the customer's need is determined by the company. | The company will determine the customer’s need and the reshipment of items. |
| 9. The participants were welcomed by the CEO, and the keynote speaker was introduced by her. | The CEO welcomed the participants and introduced the keynote speaker. |
| 10. Two serious omissions of income were discovered and corrected before the accounting records were reviewed by the auditor. | The auditor reviewed the accounting records after two serious omissions of income were discovered and corrected. |

**Activity 2: Pronouns**

**Introduction**

There can be confusion around the use of pronouns. The following activities highlight some of the issues people experience.

**Instructions**

**Me, myself and I**

For the I/me conundrum, cover the noun that comes before the pronoun and see if the sentence still makes sense – if it does, then the sentence is correct, if it doesn’t, you will need to change the pronoun to the other form. With myself/I, “myself” should come second in the sentence. Rewrite the following sentences:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Incorrect** | **Correct** |
| John and me attended the conference. | John and I attended the conference. |
| The conference was attended by John and I. | The conference was attended by John and me. |
| As for myself, I attended the conference with John. | I, myself attended the conference with John. |

**Your and You’re**

“Your” means you own the thing associated with the pronoun. “You’re” is a contraction of “you are”.

Which of the following is correct? (highlighted are correct)

“Did you attend you’re conference?”

**“Did you attend your conference?”**

**“You’re attending the conference.”**

“Your attending the conference.”

**“Your attendance at the conference was noted.”**

“You’re attendance at the conference was noted.”

**Its and It’s**

“Its” is the possessive pronoun – a word that doesn’t need an apostrophe. “It’s” is a contraction of “it is”. If you are unsure which to apply, try using “it is” in the sentence to see if it makes sense.

Which of the following is correct? (highlighted is correct)

**“It’s Sally’s checking that showed the budget didn’t balance. Its expense total was out by 15%.”**

“It’s Sally’s checking that showed the budget didn’t balance. It’s expense total was out by 15%.”

“Its Sally’s checking that showed the budget didn’t balance. It’s expense total was out by 15%.”

“Its Sally’s checking that showed the budget didn’t balance. Its expense total was out by 15%.”

**Activity 3: Making the reader care**

**Introduction**

If you want people to care about what you have written, you must provide a reason for them to care. Here are some principles to establish that caring relationship with your reader.

**Connect immediately with your reader**

* The opening paragraph must hook your reader
* Link directly to your reader's key interests and concerns in your purpose
* Start with the 'bottom line'

**What's in it for me?**

* Give your reader a reason to care. Ask, "Why should they care?"
* Put the answer to this question in the headline or the lead paragraph

**Highlight benefits, not features**

* Features describe characteristics
* Benefits are what the features give us – they contain the emotional hook
* Don't get lost in technical detail

**Focus on the concrete and limit the abstract**

* Tell stories and anecdotes
* Use examples and make them specific
* Use visuals to explain and break up the words
* Use big picture terms to create a vision
* Get rid of hyperbole

**Instructions**

Ask participants to bring a piece of their writing to the session.

Source several short articles or opinion pieces based on current events – e.g., online newspapers or search the web for ‘opinion piece’.

With the group, go through the four points listed above then have the group critically evaluate each piece of writing for these four factors.

Ask the group whether the writing is more impactful on the reader for having these elements.

Now ask participants to apply the same critique to their own piece of writing, then discuss as a group.

**Activity 4: Writing concisely**

**Introduction**

There are four main culprits with wordiness:

1. Small-word build up – words that have been added that don’t add anything of themselves, except to take up space and clog the reader’s mind.
2. Repetition – the inclusion of words that are already implied in other words (e.g., ‘compete stop’)
3. Stating the obvious – for example, “With less sunlight available the days are getting shorter.”
4. Unnecessary content – refers to unnecessary information that fills the space. If it doesn’t add anything, remove it.

**Instructions**

Ask participants to bring a piece of their own writing with them to the session.

Search the web for verbose examples of business writing and ask the group to critique the examples for the four wordiness culprits listed above.

Alternatively ask the group to critique and rewrite the following passage.

**Context**

An HR Manager wants to email all managers at ABC Company highlighting a recent discrimination complaint, pointing out the requirements under the law and inviting the managers to an information session on this issue.

**First Draft**

Let’s face it, no one at ABC Company wants to lose their job, right? It has recently come to the attention of the HR department and the senior executive of ABC Company of discriminatory practices in the area of recruitment that has resulted in the loss of a manager’s job and an investigation into ABC’s recruitment practices by the Antidiscrimination Commission. It goes without saying that the scrutiny afforded by the Commission is something that ABC Company can well do without, not to mention the reputational damage inflicted on ABC Company by such practices as those under investigation. Apart from such damage to ABC Company, the biggest loser in this whole affair was the person who made the complaint to the Commission. As a result of this incident, the HR Department, with the support of ABC Company’s senior executive and the board, will be conducting a series of lunch and learn sessions for all those staff engaged in recruitment to advise them of their legislative obligations and their obligations generally. These sessions may conflict with other activities currently being conducted in the business, which is why I am requesting that upon receiving this email you nominate which session you would like to attend by using the voting buttons above so that we know who is coming and can anticipate numbers and plan accordingly.

Now ask the group to review their own piece of writing to see if they can improve upon it.

**Activity 5: Changing the tone**

**Introduction**

Tone refers to the emotional overlay of a piece of writing. Just as in speech, emotion can enhance your written message, or it can detract from your message. The tone of a piece of writing should consider the following:

The Context

* Is your tone appropriate to the occasion?
* How formal should you sound?

Authenticity

* Straightforward
* Unpretentious
* Honest

Respectful

* Be courteous
* Never be abrupt, rude or demanding
* Respect cultural differences

**Instructions**

Ask the group to re-write the following messages using a more appropriate tone.

**Context –** The company has introduced a new online HR platform on which employees can view their pay slips and apply for and approve leave. An email has been sent by the Head of HR.

**Message**

HR is sick of dealing with complaints from staff and managers about leave entitlements and pay discrepancies. We now have a solution which puts the onus of responsibility on staff and managers. From tomorrow staff will receive their pay slips and apply for leave through the new portal. Staff will be responsible for settling differences with their managers and HR will only become involved when such differences remain unresolved – which will be hardly ever. HR will not be taking any calls directly, please use the new complaints link in the portal. Remember – don’t call us, we’ll call you.

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**Context –** A manager has just learned that three of his team will have their positions made redundant. The manager sends the following email to the team including the three employees concerned.

**Message**

Mick, Johnno and Rusty are leaving us (about time eh!). Seriously it is sad for them that their positions have been made redundant, but look on the bright side, there is plenty of opportunity out there. The world is a big place. For those of us who are left, we will just have to absorb their workload and soldier on while this place works out what it is doing.

**Activity 6: Management speak**

**Introduction**

One of the main culprits of dysfunctional business writing is ‘management speak’ or corporate jargon. Corporate phrases can be used to make something seem more impressive than it actually is.

Here is part of a pitch by two senior executives:

"I’d like to tell you about our paradigm shift in strategic talent acquisition strategy, which is leveraging value for all our stakeholders", one executive said. The other chimed in with, "By engaging our human capital we can create a burn-platform that facilitates buy-in".

You should take every opportunity in your writing to stamp out such gibberish as it adds nothing to clarity, concreteness and conciseness.

**Instructions**

Ask participants to bring with them a piece of their own writing.

Ask the group to make a list of all the ‘management speak’ phrases they can think of. Then ask them to think of an alternative word that is clearer, more concrete and more concise. Here is a brief list.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Management speak word/phrase** | **Alternative** |
| Ballpark figure | Estimate |
| Bring it to the table | Contribute |
| Pushing the envelope | Testing |
| Blue sky thinking  | Creativity |
| Take it to the next level | Improve |
| Strategic talent acquisition | Recruitment |
| Human capital | Staff |
| Facilitates buy-in  | Commits |
| Let’s circle back | Review |
| Run it up the flagpole | Present |
| Reach out | Speak to |
| The cone of silence | Private |
| At the coalface | Work |

Now ask the participants to critique their piece of writing and to identify any ‘management speak’ words or phrases and to replace them.