SUMMARY

WRITING THAT WORKS

KENNETH ROMAN
JOEL RAPHAELSON

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Summary of “Writing That Works” by Kenneth Roman and Joel Raphaelson

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Business communication that will help you get what you want.

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Introduction

When you think about business communication, do you ever feel lost? You know that “professional writing” is a thing and you know you have to sound serious and official, but what does that really look like? How do you find that tone? (Pro tip: don’t ever start a business email with “Yo dawg!” as someone once addressed an email to me!) Mastering the art of business communication might sound as tricky as learning a foreign language, but the truth is that it’s not nearly as hard as you think! So, even if you’re a super casual person and even if you hate writing, the authors promise that you can develop effective business communication strategies. So, keep reading and get ready to succeed! Over the course of this strategy, we’ll unpack some business pro tips that will help you to communicate effectively.

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A Simple Overview of Effective Communication Practices

Did you struggle with English in school? Did it take you hours to write a short essay? If that describes you, you're not alone! Many people struggle to put their thoughts into words and many others find it difficult to communicate in a formal, professional capacity. Maybe you're great at chatting with your pals or networking in a professional situation, but as soon as you have to present your ideas in an "official" or "scholarly" way, your brain freezes up. That's why the authors' first piece of advice is: don't worry! Professional communication doesn't have to be tricky and it doesn't have to read like a long essay either. In fact, all you need are short, simple sentences that get straight to the point!

If that sounds too good to be true, don't worry-- it isn't! In fact, that's simply the reality of modern business communication. Sure, in the 1800s, they might have privileged phraseology that included long sentences and big words like "heretofore" and "thereafter." But mercifully, times have changed! Instead, you should simply write the way you speak. However, that statement shouldn't necessarily be taken at face value. For example, if you use a lot of slang and profanity, that shouldn't be incorporated in your professional communication. Similarly, it would not be appropriate to respond to a colleague's email by saying, "Same" or "Mood" as you might on a Facebook post.

Instead, you should simply aim to write in a manner that sounds like natural communication. For example, if you're sending an email to a colleague, you don't need to write "Dear esteemed sir or madam." You wouldn't talk like that in real life, so don't include stuffy, formal language in your email. Instead, if you're writing to a co-worker, you could simply begin with, "Hey Rebecca! I hope you had a great weekend. I wanted to touch base with you about the quarterly reports we discussed in last week's meeting." As you can see from this example, the language used here sounds natural and more like something you would hear in a normal conversation. It also strikes a friendly tone while being clear, concise, and professional.

So, our first lesson is simply to stop trying so hard! Avoid using convoluted and overcomplicated language. Just say what you mean in a short, friendly, and accessible way.

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How to Write a Solid Professional Email

In the previous chapter, we considered a brief example of an appropriate professional email. But now it's time to dig a little deeper and unpack the ingredients of a successful business email. Let's think about it like a template or a formula that you can use over and over again to generate positive results. So, let's get down to the basics! It all starts with the subject line. Whether you're a current business professional or a job-seeking hopeful, you know that we are all bombarded by a million emails a day. So, when that notification pops up on your lockscreen, you glance first at the message preview that tells you what an email is about. The subject line is often how you decide whether or not an email is important and whether you should delete it or not. That's why it's important to craft a subject heading that will connect with your recipient immediately and tell them that your email is important.

Unfortunately, however, many internet scammers have also taken this advice and created click-bait-y headings that sound urgent. Examples of clickbait headings might include "HOT SINGLES READY FOR SEX IN YOUR AREA!" or "CLICK HERE FOR FAST CASH NOW!" Obviously, we know that these are scams simply from the subject line, so you want to craft a subject that strikes a balance between attention-grabbing and professional. Of course, it's impossible for every email to be exciting, so when you can't create a really attention-grabbing headline, just go for something clear and professional like, "Quick question about yesterday's meeting" or "Following up on interview." Once you've gotten your recipient's attention and convinced them that they need to read your email, it's time to make sure that your message strikes the right tone.

A good rule of thumb to remember is that you should keep it positive wherever possible. As we discussed in the previous chapter, everyone likes to receive an email that sounds natural and friendly. And being professional doesn't always mean being formal or stuffy. So, if you can, keep the vibe friendly and light-hearted, but not so casual that it would sound like you're chatting with your best friend. In moments where you have to be a little more somber and serious, try to adjust your tone appropriately, but continue to keep your messages short and sweet. Once you've got the tone right, the next step is to consider the content of your message. Another good rule of thumb is to convey everything you need to say in three paragraphs or less.

As we mentioned earlier this chapter, everyone is busy and the distractions of the modern world have only shortened our attention spans. We want our professional emails to be short and to the point; something we can digest quickly during a visit to the bathroom or a stop at a red light. So, strive for clarity and conciseness above all. Don't waste your time on a lot of rambling background info or draw out your email by using phrases like, "It has come to our attention that a problem has occurred…" That's boring! It's also highly likely that your recipient will quickly lose interest. So, keep it snappy and employ "I-language" with a statement like, "I'd like to discuss the recent incident…" Using "I-language" is a subtle attention-grabber because it deviates from the passive voice that is commonly implemented in professional emails as seen in the first example.

Now it's time for the next to last step: including a call to action (also referred to as a CTA). Although we typically think of CTAs in the context of a sales pitch, they can actually be useful in many other places. That's because a call to action doesn't mean that you always want someone to buy something. Instead, it could simply mean that you want someone to do something (that doesn't involve spending any money at all!) For example, in the context of a professional email, you might end the message by writing, "Could you please reply to this email to confirm that you've received the attached info?" This is a call to action because it clearly and directly states two things: you would like the recipient to do something and you are providing a precise description of what you want them to do.
Once you've completed the call to action, it's easy to think that you're finished, but don't forget the sign-off! Many people struggle to find the appropriate sign-off for a professional email, but it's not as complicated as you might think! All you have to do is follow the formula to find the tone

that's right for you. If your emails typically strike a more friendly tone and you hope to make a positive impression on your recipients, consider signing off with something like, "All best," "Kind regards," or "Best wishes," followed by your name. In more formal settings, however, this might not be appropriate, so you can end with a more aloof, "Thank you," or "Regards," followed by your name.

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Show Your Audience Why They Should Care

Have you ever sat through a boring school presentation? Maybe you were in a public speaking class in high school or college and everyone was required to sit through everyone else's presentations. You weren't there because you wanted to be and you weren't there because you wanted to hear what the other person had to say. So, on more than one occasion, you might have found yourself wondering, "Why should I care? Why does your presentation matter?" Therefore, it stands to reason that other people might be thinking the same thing about you. This is especially true if you're attempting to connect with a new client or colleague who doesn't know you and may not be interested in what you have to offer.

So, how do you make them care? If you're uncomfortable expressing yourself through writing, this might seem like a daunting and difficult task. But the good news is that it doesn't have to be quite as scary as you think! You don't have to be Einstein and you don't have to present your content in a revolutionary way. Because that's where the data comes in! Whether you're working with plans, reports, graphs, or statistics, if you're working in a professional capacity, you have some evidence other than "take my word for it." That means you can let your data speak for itself. All you have to do is craft a clear and compelling message to go with it! For example, let's say that you're pitching a client to get funding so your company can build a new library in your town. What should you say to make your client give you the money? ("Please give me the money, we really, really want it!" probably isn't the key). So, how do you make the recipient care?

Well, for starters, you can begin by pairing an appropriate message with the right supporting data. For example, maybe you're arguing that the town needs this library because of its impact on childhood development. So, make that point by showing some statistics about child literacy rates in your area. You could also pair this information with some data about the socioeconomic status of children who need the library. From there, you could summarize this data with a simple, compelling statement like: "This library is critical for the development of underprivileged children in our area. Without this library, our children will fail to develop the core communication and reading skills they need to succeed." These facts will help you support your point and craft an effective call to action.

The authors also recommend that you bolster your point by providing some key objectives that your audience can grasp quickly and clearly. In this example, your key objectives might take the form of two or three bullet points that drive your call to action home. But once you've identified those objectives, don't forget to support them by providing specific, actionable steps! For example, you know you want your client to donate a certain amount of money and you might think it's clear to them. But avoiding miscommunication is crucial, so don't forget to tie it all together by explaining that your objectives can be accomplished through the following specific action steps. By supporting these objectives with hard data and practical action steps, you can convince your audience that your points are clear, cohesive, and actionable.

Of course, that doesn't guarantee that you will always get a positive response, but it does mean that you'll have an effective formula for successfully communicating your ideas. And at the end of the day, no matter the result of your presentation, you'll know that you presented the information to the best of your ability. And as a final tip for everyone who's insecure about public speaking, the best part of this strategy is that it is not situation-specific! You can follow this formula effectively whether you're designing a powerpoint to present or a report to email to a colleague. In this case, presenting your information effectively doesn't rely on an impassioned speech or flashy graphics. All you need is a solid structure.

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Final Summary

There’s no doubt about it: business communication can seem pretty intimidating! Because formality and professionalism is so different from the casual way we conduct ourselves in real life, communicating professionally can feel as foreign as trying on a different skin. But the authors are quick to affirm that professional communication doesn’t have to be scary at all! In fact, it doesn’t even have to be formal all the time. So, don’t worry about sounding like a nobleman from the 1800s; you can throw away all the “therefores” and “whatsoevers” that we associate with official communication.

Instead, just keep your communication friendly, concise, and clear. Keep the body of your email to three paragraphs at most and craft an engaging subject heading that will get your recipient’s attention. You can also follow some simple steps to present your information in an effective way and strike the right tone in your professional emails. By implementing writing strategies that work, you’ll see that business communication doesn’t have to be scary at all!

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