

An Unlikely Guide to Good Writing: the Telephone!

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Remember the days when you tried to fill out a page or expand what you had to say to impress a teacher? Remember when a big word meant a better grade? If you are like most people, you say, “Thank heavens those days are behind me!”

Are the days of impressing teachers really gone, or have old habits infiltrated your approach to business writing? Most professionals still write to impress—they have merely switched the target from a teacher to an executive, a client, or a colleague.

In professional environments, big words, stiff phrases, and long, complex sentences don’t impress people. Rather, busy people feel annoyed and impatient when they read, “in the event that subsequent communication is required on this imperative matter....” The authors of *Writing that Works* describe this kind of writing as mumbling. Are you guilty of mumbling when you write?

Here’s some advice to avoid mumbling: judge your writing by the phone rule. Choose the same tone in writing that you choose when talking to a customer or another professional on the phone.

When on the phone, we say things in direct and straightforward ways. We never say, “Pursuant to the above mentioned matter” on the phone. We say “regarding the widget contract.” The phone rule demands we write as plainly as we talk.

The rule makes sense. After all, your job as a professional isn’t to demonstrate how smart or sophisticated you are. Your job is to serve your customers and work efficiently and effectively with your colleagues. To do this, you need to communicate clearly and concisely—the way you do on the phone.

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