

Sailing the Seven Cs of Effective Writing

by Bob 'Idea Man' Hooley

I love to sail; I love being out on the water. In 1988, I joined 3 other men for what I thought would be a leisurely sail from Honolulu, Hawaii to Kobe, Japan. Along the way we encountered what the Japanese later told us was a 'baby' typhoon. We were extremely fortunate to survive it and arrive safely in the Kobe/Osaka harbour. I've often thought that our written words and our efforts to communicate effectively run some of the same gambits, storms or challenges as we chart our course and focus on a specific harbour or objective.

I've included some ideas here that might help you avoid or navigate some of the storms and hidden obstacles to being effective in your written communication.

An effective memo, email or sales letter is one that gets results. Business correspondence can enhance or alienate relationships. Well written brochures, sales literature or websites entice people to act and explore opportunities to deal with you and your firm.

Effective writing communicates the message in a way that makes it easier for the reader to relate and react positively to what they (reader) understand. Effective writing is helped or enhanced by 'charting-a-course' to convey your message with impact.

Here are seven C's as they relate to effective writing:

1. **Be clear:** have a definite purpose for writing and make sure it is clearly communicated up front. Be bold and connect quickly. In the midst of the typhoon, we needed to be clear on our commands or risk adverse reactions to the sea.
2. **Be complete:** include all the necessary facts and background information to support the message you are communicating. Partial instructions would not work if we were to survive. Our captain had to make sure saw the complete picture.
3. **Be concise:** keep in mind the reader's knowledge of the subject and their time constraints. Convey the information as quickly and easily as possible. Keeping it concise (or short) was a life saver, more so when you needed to react immediately to a changing sea or wind pattern.
4. **Be creative:** use different formats (vs. straight narrative) to communicate your message. Q & A format, graphics, Idea lists, etc. Sometimes hand signals were needed when the wind and the sea drowned out our ability to hear.
5. **Be considerate:** keep your reader's needs in mind as you write. Ask yourself, 'Why should my reader spend time reading this?' Make it worthwhile for them to do so! We were motivated to survive, to listen and to act. Keep in mind your audience or reader might not be as receptive.

6. **Be correct:** by checking all your information is accurate and timely. Double-check your spelling, punctuation and grammar. Proofread it before you send it! We couldn't afford to make mistakes, our lives depended on it!
7. **Be credible:** strive to present yourself from a position of reliability and competence. Write to reinforce your message and make it more believable. We needed to trust that our captain, with his experience in the US Coast Guard knew what he was doing and was telling us for our own good.

I'll move away from the nautical comparisons now and leave you to navigate the remainder of this article.

Getting results from your writing

We all want to get results from what we write, don't we? But why don't we? Perhaps we miss the point and miss our reader's point too?

- Write from the reader's point of view. This will help you write more effectively.
- Use simple non-technical terms to make sure you are clear in your meaning.
- Don't use buzzwords or jargon that may confuse or distract your reader.
- Project a positive attitude to draw your reader into your message. Tell them what you can do, not what you cannot. People react better to positive reinforcement.
- Conclude your writing with a 'call to action' or a specific meaningful request.

Here are a few more letter-writing tips:

- Craft your opening and concluding statements to create a favourable impression for your intended reader. Write from their perspective.
- Keep your purpose in mind as you craft your letter. What do you want the reader to do, learn or understand when they have finished reading it?
- Use the technique of asking questions to get and keep the reader involved.
- Where possible share flattering or sincere compliments with the reader.
- Include and weave the person's name throughout the letter. Make it personal.
- Please – don't bore your reader with unnecessary history. If needed, attach as an appendix, reference piece or background piece.
- Use lists to help explain or outline information in an easy format for your reader.
- Bullet points can be a very effective tool in helping your reader navigate your written presentation.
- Check all spelling and punctuation. Remember this is a written representation of you and your firm.
- Don't be afraid to use headlines or sub-headlines to break up your letter and allow reader to focus on each section.
- As mentioned previously, avoid technical jargon and terminology.
- Verify all figures and dates – make sure they are current and accurate.
- Write to explain – not complain.

- Include a PS: hint – people will almost always read the PS: even if they don't read the body of the letter.
- Read the letter to yourself, aloud, or perhaps to another person. Ask yourself, or them, what they understand from reading it? If it does not line up with your purpose – go back to edit it until it does!

Often a quick note, memo or email will convey the message more effectively than a letter. An effective memo or email incorporates all of the above in its structure, with a few refinements.

Constructing a well written memo or email

- State your purpose early in the memo or email (subject line is effective)
- Clearly state your purpose for writing it!
- Use direct to the point statements
- Ensure the writing is well organized
- Use an easy-to-read format

When should you write a memo or email?

- Don't write a memo or email where you can settle the situation with a quick call or in person. However, if you need to follow up on a meeting or conversation, a memo or email works well.
- Don't write if the situation evokes emotional undertones or could backfire in your face. Talking face-to-face works better, and it is less 'permanent' than a written note. You want to diffuse a situation not light one under it.
- Don't write to brag or show off your latest triumph or accomplishment. This will alienate more than elevate you from those who read it. If the accomplishment is a shared one and can be used to recognize group or individual achievement, by all means capture it and share it in a memo with those who made it happen. Bragging about other people can work wonders.

Make sure your distribution list is relevant. Send your memo or email only to those who are directly concerned with the issues contained or raised in your message. Be considerate of their time and don't use memos or emails as a way to reinforce or defend your position, or indirectly put down other people in your firm.

Knowing when to write is often as important as what to write. Here are a few thoughts when you want to capture the moment or message in written form for communicating to others.

- Write to update them on progress or bring them incoming news.
- Share only the necessary or relevant news items.
- Present it in a short, concise, direct format
- Make sure you are prepared and organized - before you write it!
- Discuss relevant achievements, deadlines and milestones

- Keep your audience continuously aware of events and progress – not just in crisis or deadline crunches.
- Keep it personal and keep them interested
- Keep the communication lines open.
- Demonstrate your competency in your writing.

Writing is a very effective tool in the communication process. It has a longer shelf life and should have more effort invested to ensure that the message is clear, concise and conveys in a timely manner. Charting your course will allow you to safely avoid the storms and obstacles and allow you to navigate effectively to the communication you had in mind when you started your journey.

Taking the time to **‘think before you ink’** will work wonders in your communications efforts.

Copyright 2002-2022 Bob ‘Idea Man’ Hooey, A/S

Bob ‘Idea Man’ Hooey, DTM, PRA, CKD-Emeritus, Accredited Speaker, 2011 Spirit of CAPS recipient is an inspirational leader, speaker, and a prolific author whose works include **‘Legacy of Leadership, Strive for significance – lead on purpose!’**, **‘Speaking for Success’** and **‘The Courage to Lead!’** His articles have been featured in a multitude of North American trade and global consumer publications. He is a respected leader who has been honored by CAPS, NSA, Toastmasters, and the United Nations for his leadership contributions. His creative Ideas At Work have allowed him to travel the globe sharing insights, encouragement in 61 countries, so far. With Covid-19 he has been zooming around the globe to share his ideas. His **innovative Ideas At Work!** have been successfully applied by global leaders as well as Canada’s 50 Best Managed Companies.