

The Art of Correspondence

Write letters, emails, and texts with clarity and elegance

BY SANDY LINDSEY TIME MARCH 30, 2023 PRINT

Communicating in written form is like painting with words. But while being an artist requires skills few people possess, these tips can make anyone a better communicator.

Set a Good Tone

The best communicators are professional yet approachable in all their written communications. This means they talk to their audience rather than at them, avoiding using a preaching or lecturing tone. Nobody enjoys being lectured, and people are very likely to either stop reading or skim over a preachy message without truly comprehending it.

While writing, picture that the person or people reading it are sitting in the room with you. Write the message so that if it were read out loud, it would sound like a pleasant, interesting conversation. Write so that if you were the reader, you'd eagerly devour and enjoy every word.

Spelling Matters

The surest way to derail the most masterfully written message is to misspell words, use incorrect grammar, or make easily avoided typographical errors. Even the most experienced writers make mistakes, so they know to check their work; this is also why most publications have copy editors who read everything before it's published.

Using an app such as Grammarly can help identify problems so they can be corrected before you hit "send." Spell checkers are incredibly easy to find and use, and whenever possible, ask someone to read what you have written to look for awkward sentences or words or terms that might not make sense.

Get to the Point

The best communicators know to “lead with the big news,” which is to say they get to the point right away and then follow up with the details. The best communicators know how to start with a fact or statement that will fully engage their readers so that they absolutely will keep reading. If you “beat around the bush,” you run the risk of losing your readers before you can tell them what is truly important. Journalism 101 says to start with the main point and then expand on the relevant, important details, as if what you’re writing looks like a pyramid.

Think Twice

It can be tempting to be clever when writing, but there is always the chance your readers might not “get it,” making it a better plan to write something that you won’t later regret.

The same advice applies when you’re upset about the topic, as you may end up writing something that makes you look rude or thin-skinned.

Another time to step away from the pen or keyboard is when you’re tired or in a rush. Too often those scenarios result in sentences that don’t flow smoothly or in misstated facts. It’s better to slow down and get it right the first time.

Keep It Simple

Avoid trying to impress your readers by using words they wouldn’t normally use, or perhaps that they don’t understand. One of the greatest communicators was William F. Buckley Jr., whose trademark was “big words.” Unfortunately, this trait made him loved by many and spurned by others who felt he was talking down to them in his writing. Write clearly, in such a way that anyone from a rocket scientist to a high school student can comprehend. If your readers don’t understand the words or terms you use, they can’t possibly fully understand what you’re trying to communicate.