

COMMUNICATION

Your Company Is Only as Good as Your Writing

by Kyle Wiens

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Good writing: Businesses claim to practice it, support it, and value it. But more often than not, their money isn't where their mouth is. Poor grammar and jargon-riddled writing are rampant. We're great at inventing terms – the instruction manual for my toaster refers to the lever that pops up the toast as the 'Extra-Lift Carriage Control Lever' – but poor at communicating what we actually mean.

We could learn a thing or two about communication from our forefathers. One of the most effective speeches of all time, Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address, was only 701 words. Of those, 505 were words of one syllable and 122 had two syllables.

Great leaders consider communication a core competence, so why don't more businesses?

Manufacturers spend millions on safety training to get people to wear hard hats, but spend very little to make sure their safety critical work instructions are written clearly.

That's not good enough. Effective writing must be a company-wide endeavor.

If my marketer misses a typo while writing about a product, I want my packaging staff to catch it before the design gets sent to print. If my technicians don't capitalize a tool's name consistently, I'd hope my videographer notices the error when he glances at the report on their desks. When I'm writing an essay, I always ask my software engineers for constructive feedback. (I'm not too proud to admit that many of them are better writers than I.)

Over the years, I've worked hard to foster an atmosphere where everyone has the right to critique, question, and suggest. Just because most team members don't have "professional writer" in their job descriptions doesn't mean writing is off limits to them. Everyone here is a writer.

In my experience, the practice of good, collaborative writing makes the difference between great business and bad business – a sale or no sale.

Last year, I kicked up a bit of a stir 'round these parts when I wrote "I Won't Hire People Who Use Poor Grammar. Here's Why." I confidently declared myself a "grammar stickler," unwilling to hire qualified applicants if they couldn't pass a basic grammar test.

After the article was published, I heard back from a lot of different people. Some disagreed. One participant in a *New York Times* debate exclaimed that my "requirements that viable candidates write with Strunk and White on their minds are highly questionable." Others wholeheartedly shared my convictions. The range of feedback is to be expected. After all, the grammar debate tends to be divisive.

The feedback did prove one thing: It's not easy to talk about writing. Certainly not in business. Writing, even writing in public arenas, is *always* personal. It exposes the writer's ideas and ability (or inability) to navigate language. Writing is vulnerability.

Plus – and this is the frustrating part – there is no right way to write. Even the most basic rules are fuzzy. Prepositions aren't something you should end a sentence with. You should never start a sentence with "because." Why not? Because. Sentence fragments are unforgivable. Unless they're not.

We like to think that we learned everything there is to know about grammar in our 10th grade English classes, but the conventions are constantly changing. The standards shift. That makes writing hard – and difficult to talk about.

Writing is a tricky balancing act, juggling dozens of nebulous constraints. Writers have to think about audience, and about style, and about tone – factors that are hard to anchor down. In business, writing is inextricably tied to company identity: writers have to think about what a company stands

for, where it's going, and how that company should be presented to the public. Difficult considerations.

I've found that topics that are the most uncomfortable are usually the ones that need the most discussion. Writing is one of them. It's a conversation that is crucial to have – with everyone.

For the last 10 years, iFixit has been writing and hosting free, open source repair manuals for every thing. We weren't always as good at it as we are now. Like many publishers, we didn't have an open dialogue about what we'd written – not within the company and not with the public. And, in our early years, our writing suffered for it. In fact, some of our initial instructions led users astray – resulting in broken computers and cameras and cell phones. That was our fault, and we knew it.

But we kept writing. And we rewrote. And we talked about writing with everyone.

We started collecting tips: Keep sentences short. Don't verb nouns. Using 'you' makes you seem friendlier. Our list grew fast. Together, we worked to nail down just how iFixit sounds. Writing – and talking about writing – with each other gave us a cohesive voice.

Soon, we realized we'd written a book. And we realized that it would be an incredible shame to keep it to ourselves. Today, since so many HBR readers wrote to us asking about iFixit's writing process, I have that handbook to share with you.

Our free Tech Writing Handbook is the culmination of years of practice, of continually sharing our opinions and perspectives. We found out that writing has unintentional consequences: it's revelatory. The more you write, the more you learn about yourself. Writing about our company, about our mission, and about our users helped us understand them better. It helped us understand our vision.

If good writing is important to you and your company (as it should be), feel free to share our book with your writers (which should be each and every member of your company). Crib from it, revise it, repurpose it. Or better yet, write your own – because you can't all be on the same page if it's a blank page.

Kyle Wiens is CEO of iFixit, the largest online repair community, as well as founder of Dozuki, a software company dedicated to helping manufacturers publish amazing documentation.

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