For goodness' sake, for the reader's sake - keep it simple

Ultimately business writing should result in action and should strengthen relationships

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How much do we appreciate the challenges of our language diversity? With English being, a third, fourth or even a fifth language for many South Africans, language ability is not in question, merely proficiency at so-called business English. Would it not make sense to write plainly for clarity's sake? Do we need to adopt a highfalutin style when we conduct business? If the reader needs to decipher our writing, it is counter-productive. So let's quit being pretentious and just stick to simple English.

A disregard for clarity causes readers to file, delete or shelve it for 'later'. Do we want 'something to happen' or are we confusing the demands of business with our need to impress with redundant muddle. Writers tend to 'utilise' and 'give consideration to' while they could get as much done if they 'use' and 'consider'. We need not impress; we need to make sense to get business done.

What a relief that we can simply say it! We do that, we get things done - by saying it simply.

We need to consider several aspects before writing anything from a brief e-mail to a lengthy report. The following hints could help us to write for the reader's sake and ensure the job gets done.

Think more, write less

Churchill said that a report by its very length defends itself from being read.

So, why do we bother to write so much if it's too much to invite reading? Perhaps we write more than we think, or try to think while we write - instead of thinking before we write.

Writers invariably fall into the trap of writing before thinking. Many documents are written from the writer's perspective and expertise with little regard for the readers' needs or the readers' levels of understanding. It's the writer's job to think, if needs be, a lot!

Thinking is planning, is it not? What do we think about? We consider the purpose, the message and the readers. This includes the scope, the depth, the angle and the readers' needs.

It is easy to fire away randomly writing down thoughts. However, it does not necessarily translate into easy reading, since the reader has to wade his way through the excess or irrelevant material. We should say only what we need to say and nothing more. The right amount of thinking allows us to decide exactly what that is.

Information serves no purpose outside of context - so decide whether you are sharing information to report, persuade, request or instruct.

Here are a few ways to make the purpose of your document clear.

- Think about your purpose. Ask yourself: 'Why am I writing? What do I want the reader to do? Now design an informative headline.
- What is the big picture? WHAT IS MY POINT? Say that first.
- Make a statement, followed by facts, reasons or motivations to support your statement.

In business writing it is good to be obvious. It saves time and it avoids misunderstanding.

Quickly get to the point - get read!

If we have thought enough about what we need to say; it is easy to get to the point, because we know what it is.

People are either busy, preoccupied, have too much to read or simply don't like reading. Moreover, the immediacy of the internet has created impatient readers, allowing us a second (perhaps three seconds) to arouse interest. Quite a challenge to get read, isn't it?

In the quest to get read, making the point early is critical. If you make your point first, the reader searches for meaning related to your point. In this way the reader might just read all of what you said. If you leave your point for the last paragraph, the reader might stop reading before the end and you would not achieve what you intended to.

A clear distinction exists between writing for business purposes and writing prose or intellectual articles. Unless we consider the difference, reports will always be organised backwards. When readers pick up a report, their concern is for the result. They want the big picture before the detail. Robert Gentle says, 'People do not want to plough through a document to get to its message.'

Being upfront requires reversing the normal order of thinking - when writing business documents. The chronological order of thinking occurs during the planning and research phases of writ-
ing and should not be the pattern in writing. Once you have done your research, you already know what the readers should know. Don't keep them in the dark. Tell them upfront what you have found. While you present your supporting details, they can decide if they agree with you.

Make it easy for the reader

- **Write simply - use 'everyday' language**

If we are direct, they will read us easily; if we write simply, they will understand us easily.

No-one should ever have to read a sentence twice to understand it. People hardly read documents once, so why would they read difficult material again to understand it? A normal style helps readers to understand effortlessly, so they can put all their effort into doing what was asked. If our aim is to sound normal, we can replace words and phrases like ‘assistance’ and ‘with regard to’ with ‘help’ and ‘about’. (Strange that people have to be trained to be simple, while they naturally complicate matters.)

In 2005 the Public Service Commission requested departments to ‘cut the jargon and write reports in plain language to foster transparency’ (Pretoria News, March 31, 2005). The archaic tendency to employ sophisticated diction to say something ordinary remains an obstruction to making easy sense.

Instead of:

Access to the parking area is prohibited unless you are in possession of an access card.

Rather say:

- **Restricted parking: Card holders only** (Stern tone)
- **Parking is restricted to card holders. (Friendlier)**
- **Sorry, you may only park here if you have an access card. (Informal and open)**

Adopting simplicity may be construed by some to be a ‘dumbing down’ (in the words of a course delegate). On the contrary, a simple style reflects clarity of thought and requires hard work and hard thinking, because it allows no wordiness and waffle, only essential facts and sense.

- **Be concise - less is more**

Sense is also often obscured by verbosity. The plain version: sense is often buried under too many words. Concise isn’t the opposite of long, it is the opposite of wordy. Wordiness reflects negatively on the writer’s ability to think clearly. If writing is essentially about thinking, people should learn to think differently before they will be able to write differently.

- **It’s always good to be specific**

We avoid confusion by giving concrete information that does not allow readers to interpret. Instructions and recommendations are meant to be followed and not interpreted. The ability to think in concrete terms and relate business to verbs (actions) rather than abstract concepts can be learnt.

Instead of: Give consideration to the remarkable improvement in delivery.

Rather say:

Consider: The 25% improvement in delivery.

- **Structure information for easy access**

   - Informative headlines give readers a choice and tell them what to expect.
   - White space makes the document inviting and improves readability.
   - Structured information is logical.

- **Keep it business-minded - make it happen**

In 2005 the Public Service Commission also asked Departments to align their results to their strategic objectives. Relate reports to plans and budgets and they will become meaningful business documents that will result in sound business decisions - something will get done!

Useful information results in appropriate action or insight. It simplifies matters if you separate information from instructions. Be clear on your expectations, but ensure an accommodating tone. If the reader does not feel acknowledged, he might not be inclined to follow instructions, even when they are clear. Remember we aim to maintain relationships and get the job done.

Let’s become like-minded

Do you often receive documents that elicit a satisfied glance or rather a frustrating glare? Are you expected to read dense body copies, poorly organised information, irrelevant material, superficial language and lots and lots of words saying very little? Have you ever wished your software had a ‘search for meaning’ function?

If as readers we experience these frustrations, should we as writers not aim for enlightenment rather than bewilderment? Shall we agree to keep it simple for the reader’s sake, for business’ sake?

Converting to Generally Accepted Municipal Accounting Practice

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Auditing SA

**Conclusion**

Despite the many advantages of conversion to harmonised modern accounting practices, many municipalities are going to struggle to cope with the demands of GAMAP and much capacity is needed to implement the sometimes very complex changes. As the public sector does not have sufficient resources to facilitate this process they will have to call in the services of experts with insight into both the new and the old, and a passion for the public sector, to help government meet this challenge head-on.