

Develop Dynamic Writing Skills That Get Results

Lisa A. Beach
Director of Public Relations
Burlington County Association of
REALTORS®, New Jersey

Do you suffer from parched, puffy prose? You know the symptoms—swollen statements, dry delivery, weary words.

If you're infected with this communication disease, you're contaminating your message and killing your image. Don't despair! You *can* be treated, if not cured. Here's how to get well soon.

First, understand the competition you face for members' attention. With time at a premium for today's busy REALTORS®, you can't afford to clutter your communication with run-on sentences, hidden meanings, and big, stuffy words. You'll lose your audience in the first few seconds. Instead, you must immediately snare readers attention. How? Pack enough punch to compel readers to continue reading, whether it's a newsletter article, flyer, letter, or memo. (For more information, read the "How to Write a Knock-Out Newsletter," next page.)

Okay, easy for me to say—I'm a writer. But what about you, the busy REALTOR® association executive who doesn't have time to be creative? Well, unlike a magician, I'm going to share my tricks of the trade with you.

Make Every Word Count

Follow these simple guidelines to increase the likelihood that your members will stop and read what you send them.

• **Write with a clear purpose in mind.** Are you trying to inform your readers? Entertain them? Persuade them? Motivate them? Know what communication goal you want to achieve, then stick to your plan. Trying to accomplish too many objectives dilutes the strength of your message. To help define your goal,

finish the following statement before you begin any writing project: "After members read this, I hope they . . ." Then plan your content accordingly.

• Use simple, familiar words.

Studies show that the average reading level is eighth or ninth grade. Don't write over your readers' heads. Example: substitute "grant" for "appropriation," "assume" for "postulate," and "total" for "aggregate."

• **Use specific, concrete words to create visual images in your readers' minds.** General words imply vague meanings that may confuse readers. Example: say "386 IBM-compatible computer" instead of "office equipment."

• **Write tightly.** Eliminate excessive wording to develop a brisk writing style that gets your message across quickly. Example: use "now" for "at the present time" and "soon" for "in the near future."

• **Use strong, active verbs to convey vitality.** Avoid using the passive voice—it drains the energy from your writing. Example: Change "It was decided by the committee . . ." to "The committee decided . . ."

And don't abuse forms of the verb "to be," such as "am," "was," and "are." Example: Change "The seminar was well-attended" to "Members packed the classroom."

• **Keep your sentences relatively short.** Don't make readers muddle through marathon sentences. Longer sentences usually contain more than one idea. This makes it more difficult for readers to grasp your meaning. Although you should vary the length of your sentences for variety, pace, and tone, try to maintain an average sentence length of 17 words.

• **Write the way you talk.** Adopt a conversational tone. How? Use contractions. Use the words you, me, us, and I. Talk with your readers, not at them. Example: Say "I'm sending the information you asked for" instead of "Enclosed please find the requested

information as per our phone conversation."

• **Quit when you're finished.** Many people don't know how to say what they have to say, and then stop. They exhaust readers with unnecessary information and worthless words. How do you determine if you've written enough—or too much? Ask yourself these questions: Did I provide readers with the information they

Understand the competition you face for members' attention.

need to make a decision, come to a conclusion, take action, and so on? Did I achieve the communication goal I've outlined? Did I include only those words, sentences, and paragraphs that add something to my message? When you answer "yes" to these three questions, you're done.

Package the Message

Communicating to your members doesn't end with the content of your writing. You must consider the presentation of your writing as well. Although style should never outweigh substance, don't underestimate the power of packaging. Creating a writing project that invites readers in, increases the chance of it being read.

The primary purpose of a good design is to make the content accessible to your readers. An effective design should guide readers, clarify information, and enhance your message.

Adopt the *USA Today* approach and use interesting graphs, charts, illustrations, and photos to make your message visually appealing. Use graphic elements such as bullets, boxes, rules, and screen tints to breathe life into a dull project.

No matter what graphic techniques you employ, never allow your design to impede your message. If readers must stumble through an overpowering design, they'll never make it to your message. Then you both lose.

Measure the Results

Don't run to your word processors just yet. You're not quite finished. If you want to develop dynamic writing skills that get results, you must measure your efforts. Test the waters often through informal meetings, conversations, and phone calls. Conduct more formal measurement through readership surveys, communication audits, and focus groups.

What should you look for? Ask members if they read what you send

them. If not, ask why. Find out if members understand your message and know the issues. Determine what information needs your members still need fulfilled.

Now that you know how to pull all

Ask members if they read what you send them. If not, ask why.

these communication elements together, it's time to check your writing pulse. Have your symptoms gone into remission? Here are signs of recovery: Clear thoughts. Vigorous verbs. Simple sentences.

You may still need an occasional communication checkup. But if you apply a healthy dose of these suggestions to your writing, your communication efforts will flourish. ■

Ms. Beach has been with the Burlington County Board five years. She holds a master's degree in public relations and teaches a newsletter journalism course at a local college.

For Additional Information

Diamond, Susan Z. Sharpen your writing skills. *Real Estate Business*. Sum. 83:32-35.

Joseph, Albert. Your employees' writing; tips on how to review and edit wisely from the author of Put It In Writing. *Association Management*. Vol. 4, No. 1 85:8-10 +.

Miller, Judi Beinstein. Building communication skills. *Real Estate Business*. Vol. 4, No. 1 85:8-10 +.

How to Write a Knock-Out Newsletter

Once you master the basics of writing outlined in the above article, you can tackle any communication project with confidence. Let's look at a typical situation where you can put your writing skills to the test—the association newsletter.

How can you pull readers into your newsletter articles? Focus on the headline and lead paragraph to draw readers in and keep them there. Compose the headline before you even write the article. Why? It helps focus the article.

Headlines That Hook

- Catch readers' attention immediately. Use the headline to sell the article to readers, forcing them to continue.
- Write in the present tense, not past or future. It keeps the news fresh and active. Don't forget to include a subject and active verb in every headline.
- Be specific. A vague headline doesn't entice readers, it repels them. Turn the headline into a "reader magnet" by giving the details readers crave.
- Keep it short and simple. A few carefully chosen words go a long way.

• Satisfy superficial readers with a message. Some readers scan headlines only. You can ensure these readers still get your message by summarizing the article in your headline.

Still stuck on how to write a headline? Here are four common types of headlines you can use to drive your message home succinctly:

- **How To.** Example: How to Pump Up Your Sales Meetings
- **Question.** Example: Are You Stuck in the Wetlands Dilemma?
- **Challenge or Command.** Example: Market Yourself to Success!
- **Basic Fact.** Example: Airport Safety Law Affects REALTORS®

Lead On

Let's assume you've pulled readers into your article. How can you compel them to continue? Fine-tune your lead paragraph. According to writing expert Peter Jacobi, your lead should be clear, concise, complete, credible, conversational, and captivating. When you consider that you have about 20 seconds to get readers' attention, your lead must work fast.

So what makes a lead good? Accuracy. Honesty. Simplicity. Brevity. Keep in mind that readers will only

read the lead once. A good lead makes the rest of your article a must-read.

If writer's block sets in as soon as you try to write the lead, use one of these approaches to spark your creativity:

- **Digest Lead.** Summarize the essential facts using the five basic W's of journalism: who, what, when, where, and why.
- **Direct Appeal.** Address readers as "you." This makes readers feel like they're each in a one-on-one conversation with you.
- **Quotation Lead.** Feature a dramatic statement from your association president, a committee chair, Shakespeare. Whatever works to grab readers' attention.
- **Suspended Interest Lead.** Whet readers' appetites with an unusual tidbit of information. When you've hooked readers, move on to the main course.
- **Question Lead.** Ask readers a question in the lead. They'll continue reading to find the answer. ■