

Look around your office. Are most people writing? If you are in a profession or any kind of service industry, it's a safe bet that they are.

Whatever we think we do at work (doctor, nurse, lawyer, engineer, policy developer, psychologist, clerk, insurance agent, entrepreneur), we are also writers. Every day, we write emails, reports, letters, emails, proposals, submissions, emails, board papers, ministerials, briefs, tenders, memorandums ... and emails. Some of us also tweet and blog and position our businesses on discussion groups.

Most organisations are writing factories, but they don't know it. Writing is the great invisible industry we all labour at each day, without noticing.

Until it goes wrong.

I have worked on writing with thousands of frustrated people in government departments, council offices, universities and insurance offices. I am called in when writing processes have broken down in their organisations.

Here are some of the situations that finally prompt people to call on my services:

- The board of a private company or a government minister is furious about wasted time because they rely on overly long, overly technical, confusing paperwork to inform their decisions.
- Government departments and insurance companies are bogged down in rework, bad media and even court cases resulting from letters to customers that are defensive, aggressive, patronising or just plain wrong.
- Supervisors and managers, often at a very senior level, find they are spending large amounts of time rewriting documents or correcting punctuation. They are exhausted.
- Staff find their work constantly being rewritten and they can't work out the rules. Many of them have stopped trying. They find the whole process frustrating and sometimes even humiliating.

None of these people is enjoying the writing process. They thought they were there to do something else, something useful, and they don't understand why they are spending so much time on a skill they see as peripheral.

Bad writing is expensive

The National Commission on Writing surveyed 120 major corporations employing nearly eight million people, to discover the state of writing in America in 2004.

The survey found that writing was a 'threshold skill' for hiring and promotion among salaried workers – a ticket to professional opportunity. More than half of the responding companies frequently produced technical reports, formal reports, memos, correspondence, emails and PowerPoint presentations. Because of email, more employees had to write more often and a lot more had to be documented.

More than 40 per cent of responding firms were training their staff in business or technical writing, because people did not have the necessary skills. It was costing American businesses **\$3.1 billion annually** to remedy deficiencies in writing. And that cost only relates to training—they did not attempt to measure the costs of wasted time in rewriting, nor the costs to reputation.

The commission was startled by the extent of the problem and called for a writing agenda for the nation.

How much does writing cost in my organisation?

In Australia, we do not have a Commission on Writing and there is no comprehensive way to assess the costs of bad writing in business and government. But we can do some sums that give us an idea of what it may be costing in our organisations.

Let's start by looking at the costs of reading and writing, when everything is going well and using modest salary figures.

Reading costs for a manager

Average reading time:	200 words a minute
Salary:	\$100,000 a year or \$50 an hour
Time taken to read a 10,000 word document:	50 minutes
Cost of reading that document:	\$41.66

Writing costs for an employee

Average writing time:	500 words an hour (optimistically)
Salary of employee:	\$60,000 a year or \$30 an hour
Time taken to write a 10,000 word document:	20 hours
Cost for one document:	\$600

If that staff member spends a third of their time at work writing, the cost of their writing to the organisation is \$20,000. If the manager spends a third of their time reading, that costs more than \$30,000 a year.

And that is assuming that the whole process goes smoothly.

If the manager is doing extensive rewrites, at \$50 an hour, you can see how the costs can start to spiral exponentially. In my work, I have seen executives at the highest level—with incomes of half a million dollars or more—making corrections to lists of bullet points or rewriting letters because the tone is wrong.

I have seen government departments paying fees of thousands of dollars for failure to sign a contract on time. Why? Well the minister had to be briefed in writing about the purpose of the contract; that brief was delayed for rewriting.

I have seen letters sent to customers to inform them of a service they were to receive. The letters arrived months after the date provided in the letter, with the service still not supplied. Of course, these cases lead to more letters and phone calls, all of which have to be answered, adding more and more to the organisation's writing bill.

When a badly written letter offends a customer, they may write back angrily, go to the media or just phone a lawyer. More often than you would care to imagine, a letter that could have resolved a situation turns into a project for an overworked staff member, which lasts weeks or months—writing more letters and memorandums, dealing with media enquiries, managing legal issues.

The 'soft' costs

Early in my business career, I was excited to win a six-week contract with an international aid program to develop a communication project in Papua New Guinea. I wasn't put off by what I heard about living in a compound. I wanted a chance to take challenging work that might help people who really needed it.

The reality was rather different.

On my first day at work, my Australian boss asked me to develop a short project plan to outline my approach. Once that plan was approved, I could begin work. I gave her my plan by the end of the second day and was happy when she said it was fine, but there were a few writing problems. She marked my document in red, showing her preferences for style issues like capitalisation and bullet points. I made the changes she asked for in half an hour and took the document back for approval.

To my surprise, she made further comments in red, some of which reversed her original requests. I made the changes quickly and sent them back. To cut a long and painful story short, we were still going through this process two weeks later. Two weeks out of my precious six weeks had gone on a process that I had begun to see as a test of my sanity. I had tried to discuss the matter with her several times, but was told I needed to be patient.

In the end, we reached deadlock and I left for home early, feeling I had escaped from a Kafka novel. Not till much later, when I heard she had done the same thing to someone else, did I realise that this highly paid official was playing a deliberate game to prevent outsiders from working in her patch.

I have never since had such an extreme experience of the corrosive power of personal whim in the corporate writing process, but I have often seen staff struggling to adapt to the different writing styles of supervisors in large organisations. These supervisors are generally not trained editors, but they are carrying out an editing role. Some of them are applying the grammatical and style principles they learned at school, decades before, without realising they have changed. Some of them are unaware of the company style guide or the need for consistent style.

Both staff and their editors may be excellent writers in other circumstances. Some of the most frustrated writers I work with are people who have written university theses of a high standard. They don't understand why their writing is failing at work. No one has explained that they simply have to learn a new set of rules for business writing and they will soon excel at that as well.

In the worst cases of my experience, staff have simply given up trying. They hand in shoddy work, what I would call a rough first draft, on the principle that ‘they will change it, whatever I write’. These staff are demoralised and resentful; their supervisors are worn out from the endless and thankless task of rewriting. All of them would like to get on with their real jobs.

But emails aren’t writing!

Many staff do not write 10,000 word documents. They write emails and the occasional memo and, typically, they do not see this as writing. Staff who only write emails are sometimes surprised if a supervisor sends them to a writing class. They see email as an extension of a thought rather than an act of writing. For example, they are thinking, ‘Who took my lunch out of the fridge?’, their fingers are dancing over the keyboard, —and suddenly an all staff email has gone out.

Emails sent thoughtlessly are probably the most expensive item of writing there is. They cause confusion and offense and, tediously often, they force people to read things that aren’t relevant to them at all. I’m not going to start on all the things that can go wrong with emails. But it’s worth noting that they are probably the most accountable documents you can ever write: more people see them than any other document and it’s impossible to get rid of them. Many corrupt employees end up in jail because forensic detectives seized their computers. You can’t shred an email.

We could add up all these writing costs for an organisation, but it would take a long time and be very dispiriting. I don’t know any organisation that has tried. And I don’t blame them—some things are just too painful to think about.

Bad writing hurts people

A woman wrote to a power company to complain that her power was continually cut off, which made it hard for her to run a small business from home. She said she had tried to phone the company several times, but had been unable to get through the automated voice answering system.

Three months later, she received a 10 page reply, which included tables of figures on the numbers of people in her area whose power was cut off and on the number of calls the company received, as well as general information on the power company. After carefully reading the letter several times and showing it to members of her family, she realised that the power company was:

- denying that her power had ever been cut off
- stating that, if she did lose power, it was out of their control
- insisting that they had no intention of looking into the matter further, nor of making it easier for her to phone them.

‘If they’d written to me quickly and told me—briefly—that they couldn’t fix it and they were sorry, I would still have been upset, but I wouldn’t have felt this overpowering desire to kill anyone in their company uniform’, she told me.

A man visited the outpatients’ section of a public hospital and asked for a hip replacement. The nurse said they would put his name on the waiting list. Four years later, he wrote a plaintive letter asking where he was on the waiting list. He received a curt note saying that, due to cost cutting, the hospital no longer performed hip replacements and quoting the relevant legislation.

Some people don't know when writing is the wrong thing to do.

A boss wrote an email to a staff member who had lost a baby saying it was time for her to stop dwelling on babies and get on with her job.

Staff at a private company discovered they had been sacked in an all staff memo. Staff at a government department discovered their department had been closed down when they read a ministerial media release.

In Mandy Johnson's excellent book on recruitment, *Winning The War for Talent* (Wiley:2014) she advises that the way companies offer a new job to someone influences whether they take it or not. She offered a real example of a letter that failed to convey the excitement of the moment:

Dear _____,

We wish to advise that you have been successful in your application for the advertised role. Please fill out the 10-page contract enclosed and post it back to our administrations centre within seven days. Your induction will be on the 2nd of September at 9am. Please wear closed-in shoes to comply with our workplace health and safety regulations. We will issue you with your employee number on arrival and you must wear your employee badge at all times. If you have any questions, ring _____.

Yours sincerely,

Johnson says that if she had been the successful recruit, she would have run a mile.

Every day, people write to government departments, councils, insurance companies, banks, phone companies and utilities providers to ask them to solve problems. And, very often, they receive answers with no solutions and no sympathy, expressed in jargon and full of political or corporate 'cut-and-paste' platitudes.

The people who write the letters and emails don't (usually) intend to be offensive; often they feel powerless to help and don't know how to say anything helpful or positive about things out of their control.

But the people who receive the letters feel personally insulted and are often deeply hurt by the tone, the timing and the pomposity of the correspondence.

The writer is thinking of a letter as a task, something to move from the in-tray to the out-tray. The reader thinks of it as a personal response to their need.

In every communication, there are two levels: the overt level of the actual words and the underlying level of the pervasive human need to be heard, recognised, understood and accepted. A therapist friend of mine refers to these as the 'role' and 'soul' levels of communication.

When we are put indefinitely on hold or we get a bureaucratic, insensitive letter or memo, we feel it deeply as a lack of respect.

What is good writing?

When I speak of good writing, I don't mean anything fancy. The good writing I am talking about is:

- easy to understand
- purposeful
- easy to look at
- concise
- coherent
- cogent
- courteous
- grammatical
- persuasive.

And, of course, it respectfully acknowledges underlying issues and feelings.

What are the benefits of good writing to organisations?

Good writing is good for your reputation. It resolves problems faster. It reduces the chances of poor media and damaging legal cases. It makes decision-making faster and more effective.

Good writing lets you get on with your real job.

What does it take to make good writing a fundamental part of your organisation?

American businesses were spending \$3.1 billion a year in 2004 to train staff in business writing. That means they were bringing in trainers like me for one or two day courses, mostly to train junior staff.

I bet my monthly grocery budget that the amount they are spending on training has not gone down since then.

I feel safe in that bet because I find myself going back time and time again to the same organisations to deliver writing training. Staff enjoy the training, they learn new skills and ways to keep improving, but the organisational problem remains.

Training is useful, but it doesn't work on its own. Becoming a good writing organisation is a change process like any other. You only succeed when your organisation develops a good writing culture.

Here are some of the elements for making good writing culture:

- As always, start with commitment from senior managers.
- Consider KPIs to measure writing success and compliance measures to ensure people pay attention to them
- Get the legal people onside—they can sabotage clear plain writing practices if they are not part of the change.
- Get the communication team involved. They can be a great help.
- Give staff permission to write well. Let them know what the new expectations are.
- Develop good style guides and writing policies and promote them at induction and whenever they change.
- Streamline approval processes.
- Get professional training for writers and editors.
- Promote successes.

- Encourage open discussion about problems that arise and have project officers responsible for solving those problems e.g. adding explanations to the style guide or dealing with snags in approval processes.
- Review, review, review

Everybody is a writer and, if they do it well, the world is a kinder, happier place and businesses are run more sensibly and efficiently. I can help you make that happen.

Sandra Hogan