

Why business writing skills are important

Helen Cunningham and Brenda Greene are the authors of *The Business Style Handbook: An A-to-Z Guide for Effective Writing on the Job*, recently published in an updated second edition. We contacted them to get their best advice for administrative professionals who want to improve their workplace writing skills.

Why do you feel written communication skills are so important in business today?

Technology has made everyone in the workplace a writer, and writing is a highly visible skill. When you send an email or other written communication, it is out there for people to see. It reflects on you and, if you are an administrative professional, it also reflects on your boss, so it's essential to get it right. Today, your reputation and success in business are increasingly dependent on your ability to communicate well.

What's the most common mistake you see people make when it comes to their written communication at work?

Actually, two mistakes top the list. The first is carelessness, often because of deadlines and tight schedules. In the rush to get out an email, too many people fail to check it for grammar, spelling and punctuation, as well as overall content. Is it clear and purposeful? Does it provide the necessary information? Is there an action item, and is it clearly stated along with a deadline? The second error is not considering the audience. Business writers need to think about who will see their communication and then tailor it accordingly. And always remember that email can be forwarded, so you never know who will end up reading it.

What's your top piece of advice to an administrative professional who wants to improve her written communication skills?

Take note of well-written communications and learn from them. If you're unsure about how to write something, don't make a guess and hope for the best. Resolve your questions by using a stylebook or a dictionary, which are available both online and in print. Also remember that communication is part of your personal brand, so you want to be as professional as possible.

More people are communicating via smartphones and tablets. What are your favorite tips for doing that well?

Write a descriptive subject line. Be concise. Cover all the bases. When possible, paste in the contents of attachments so your recipient doesn't have to download material. Don't compromise your writing standards. Mobile devices don't give you license to write sloppy communication.