



# EXPLICIT BUSINESS WRITING

BEST PRACTICES FOR THE  
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

R. CRAIG HOGAN, PH.D.  
DIRECTOR OF THE BUSINESS WRITING CENTER

## *Best Practice*

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Include everything every intended reader needs to be able to achieve your objectives.

**Guidelines for this best practice:**

1. Include only the information that will accomplish the business objectives with these readers.
2. Write the central idea(s) in a word or a few words.
3. Words representing concepts are referred to in this book as "key terms."
4. Revise the words to make them precise key terms.
5. Write key terms for the main points explaining each central idea.
6. Write key terms for the sub-points explaining the main points.
7. Write key terms for the remaining levels to the depth the reader needs.
8. For documents that have a format, such as an audit report, write the major headings for the report, and then work with sections one at a time.
9. For instructions and procedures, write key terms for every critical action.
10. Revise the words to make them precise key terms appropriate for the readers.

**Include only the information that will accomplish the business objectives with these readers.**

Explicit business writing includes exactly what readers need to accomplish the business objectives, with no unnecessary information. Too often, an e-mail or report is so dense with irrelevant information that

the reader doesn't finish it, or it is so incomplete the reader doesn't have enough information to understand it.

The text that follows explains how to select the information that will accomplish your business objectives.

### **Write the central idea(s) in a word or a few words.**

On the first page of your e-mail, memo, letter, or report, write the central idea in capitals using one word or a few words. Bold, center, or capitalize the words. If you have more than one central idea, write a word or few words for each. That would be the case if you were writing an e-mail with three distinct subjects: the Eastern Region's third-quarter revenue, possible candidates for the position of account manager, and the date the new product will be ready for sale. Those three very different subjects represent three central ideas. Nearly all reports have one central idea.

#### **❖ Example**

Imagine you're preparing an e-mail for a team whose role is to advise upper-level management about changes that might be needed in the work environment. The e-mail will explain two topics: information about the next meeting and problems employees have encountered with the new scheduling software.

You would write these two central ideas as you started to think through what will be in the e-mail:

<p><b>INFORMATION ON THE NEXT MEETING</b></p> <p><b>PROBLEMS WITH THE NEW SCHEDULING SOFTWARE</b></p>
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### **Words representing concepts are referred to in this book as "key terms."**

Throughout this book, words that represent concepts important to the document are referred to as "key terms." A key term is any combination of words you use to identify the concept in your mind.

### ❖ Examples

The key terms are bolded in the sentences that follow. Each key term represents a concept:

This report explains our **rationale** for **purchasing new assembly equipment**.

We discovered that the **division losses** were due to **accounting errors**.

The words presented on the previous page as the central ideas for an e-mail are the key terms for the concepts:

**INFORMATION ON THE NEXT MEETING**

**PROBLEMS WITH THE NEW SCHEDULING SOFTWARE**

As you can see, often the key terms contain several words or an entire phrase. The key term should include all the words that will identify the concept explicitly for you and the reader. Instead of referring to them as "key words or key phrases," this book simply refers to all the words that identify a concept clearly in your mind as a "key term."

Readers will find your consistent use of key terms very helpful as you use the terms to help them navigate through your explanations.

### **Write key terms for the main points explaining each central idea.**

Explicit business writing has clearly defined levels of thought the reader can see easily. For example, imagine the central idea for a document is "three changes in the billing system." That central idea might have three main points, one for each change in the billing system:

1. Improving the dunning letters
2. Using a new invoice form
3. Beginning a new method of tracking payments

The three main points are called Level 1 points because they are at the highest level; they explain the central idea.

Follow this procedure to write the key term for each Level 1 point that explains the central idea. If the document has more than one central idea, repeat this process for each central idea. Write as many words as

you need to identify the point explicitly, but no more. Resist writing sentences you feel you need to edit.

1. Skip a line under the central point key term and write a word or a few words describing the first Level 1 point the reader will need to understand to accomplish your business objectives. These words comprise the first Level 1 point key term.
2. Below that first Level 1 point key term, write key terms for the other Level 1 points you know the reader must understand, placing each one on its own line.
3. Place a number 1 before each Level 1 point key term. Every Level 1 point must be separate from every other. In other words, you shouldn't have a Level 1 point that explains another Level 1 point.

#### **Critical tests:**

After you have written the Level 1 point key terms, evaluate them by answering these critical questions:

1. **Will these Level 1 points provide all the information this reader needs?** Look at your evaluations for knowledge of the subject, education, technical knowledge, need for concreteness, and need for depth. Add any information you believe this reader will need.
2. **Do I have any Level 1 points this reader does not need?** Delete any unnecessary points. Include only the information that is necessary to achieve your objectives.

#### **❖ Example**

These are the notes for a document using the illustration of levels presented in the previous example. The writer has chosen not to capitalize the Level 1 point key terms.

#### **THREE CHANGES IN THE BILLING SYSTEM**

- 1 improving dunning letters
- 1 using new invoice forms
- 1 using a new method for tracking payments

## **Write key terms for the sub-points explaining the main points.**

Each Level 1 point will have sub-points explaining it. A sub-point that explains a Level 1 point is a Level 2 point. Below each Level 1 point key term, write key terms for Level 2 points that explain it. You may go back and forth between the Level 1 points, adding Level 2 points as they come to you. Allow yourself to think freely so you consider everything you must explain in the document.

Evaluate the Level 2 points as you did the Level 1 points. Do you have what this reader needs, considering the reader's knowledge of the subject, education, technical knowledge, need for concreteness, and need for depth? If not, add it.

Is any information unnecessary? If so, delete it.

## **Write key terms for the remaining levels to the depth the reader needs.**

If a Level 2 point has information explaining it, the points in that information are Level 3 points. Continue adding levels to the depth the reader needs. Write numbers to show the levels.

Evaluate the points as you did the Level 1 and Level 2 points. Do you have what this reader needs, considering the reader's knowledge of the subject, education, technical knowledge, need for concreteness, and need for depth? If not, add it. Is any information unnecessary? If so, delete it.

### **❖ Example**

These are the notes someone might write for the report about the three changes in billing procedures referred to in a previous example. The numbers to the left of the key terms show the levels. The writer has capitalized the Level 1 key terms to keep them separate from lower level key terms.

This writer has chosen to put the key terms into longer phrases, with some forming sentences. However, she has resisted trying to edit them to make them perfect sentences.

The important parts of the key terms are the words that represent concepts, such as "improve dunning letters" and "opportunities to pay over time." Words such as "offering," "by which," and "with" just make

the meaning of the key terms clear for the writer as she prepares her notes. When she writes later, she will keep the important words in the key term words and drop or change the unimportant words.

### THREE CHANGES IN THE BILLING SYSTEM

- 1 IMPROVING DUNNING LETTERS
  - 2 Offering opportunities to pay over time
  - 2 Extending the time by which payments must be made
  - 2 Listing a local collection agency with a local address
    - 3 Customers respond better to local agencies
    - 3 We identified local agencies in twenty cities
    - 3 Their names will appear on dunning letters
  
- 1 USING NEW INVOICE FORMS
  - 2 Explaining the taxes more clearly
  - 2 Including our telephone payment number
  
- 1 USING A NEW METHOD FOR TRACKING PAYMENTS

If this report were intended to provide general information for all employees in the Billing Department, the three levels of detail in the report likely would provide the depth of information most employees needed. However, for the Billing Department employees who will have to carry out these changes, the writer may need to add depth with Level 4, Level 5, and even Level 6 details. For example, these employees would need to know the names and addresses of the local agencies, how the names will appear on the letters, how to coordinate with the agencies, and so on.

**For documents that have a format, such as an audit report, write the major headings for the report and then work with sections one at a time.**

Documents such as audit reports have fairly prescribed formats. Treat each section as a central idea. Write the heading you must use for each section in caps. Below each, write notes for the Level 1 points within the section. Then write notes for the Level 2 points explaining the Level 1 points. Finish by writing notes for points at any deeper levels.

Write the points in order so you can ensure that the points in earlier sections have counterparts in later sections. Every section of a report