

## 10 Tips to Improve Your Business Writing

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### 1. Refer to dollar numbers in the same way most of the business press refers to these numbers.

Examples of what you should write:

- \$5 million
- \$4.19 per gallon
- \$114.6 million
- GDP of almost \$7.5 trillion

Don't use the full number, such as "\$5,000,000" unless the specific detail is important. (Of course, if you are creating a table in Excel, or a formal financial statement, then the specific number should be used.)

Use the \$ sign. Don't write "5 million dollars". Instead, write "\$5 million." Round and abbreviate correctly. No one will care much (or remember) that sales were "\$5.376 million". Instead, write "\$5.4 million," something a reader can remember more easily.

### 2. Write "cannot" correctly as one word.

### 3. Check all of your writing for proper use of "their" and "there".

"Their" is the pronoun that refers to some group's possession. "There" takes various parts of speech, depending on its use. But it mostly refers to a place, not possession.

### 4. Use page numbers on any document that spills over to two or more pages.

Term papers, memos, business reports – all of these should have page numbers if they have two or more pages.

Learn how to set page numbers automatically and how to place page numbers in the header or footer area using a word processing application. It's an easy thing to do, but takes a few minutes of exploration to figure it out. Do it.

### 5. Use colons (":") and semi-colons (";") correctly.

A *colon* is used to emphasize ideas or facts that follow. It urges the reader on. What follows it might be a list of things or a complete sentence.

*Yes: The Fed chairman concluded with a key point: The economy is almost certainly heading toward recession.*

Yes: *As the case explained, there were three main reasons why the 2001 merger failed: too much debt, a clash of corporate cultures, and shifting consumer tastes.*

What follows a *semi-colon* is a complete sentence, and it is connected to what comes before the semi-colon.

Yes: *Wal-Mart gained market share in many product areas; most of this gain was attributable to electronics, food, and pet supplies.*

No: *Wal-Mart gained market share in many product areas; such as electronics, food, and pet supplies.*

**6. Capitalize names, brands, cities, and other proper nouns – and only those things.**

Don't capitalize words that might represent important terms but are not proper nouns. Here is an example from a business student report:

No: *One important reason why Quarter 7 results fell was that we did not make enough investment in Research and Development.*

Neither “Quarter” nor “Research and Development” should be capitalized. Yes, the quarter is an important one, and research and development is an important part of business. These are not names or proper nouns, however.

One more example:

No: *Most economists estimate that Inflation for 2007 will be about 4%.*

Inflation is an important economic variable, but it does not need to be capitalized.

**7. Companies and countries should be referenced by using “it,” not “their”.**

Save the pronoun “their” for references to people, groups of people, or groups of countries and companies. Here are some examples:

No: *Apple reported their net profits rose by 20% compared to last year's results.*

Yes: *Apple reported its net profits rose by 20% compared to last year's results.*

No: *The record setting investment in Beijing's summer Olympics is a measure of their pride.*

Yes: *The record setting investment in Beijing's summer Olympics is a measure of the city's pride.*

Yes: *As the Chinese people see it, the investment in the summer Olympics is a measure of their pride.*

No: *Yahoo!'s rejection of the Microsoft bid may not have been in their best interest.*

Yes: *Yahoo!'s rejection of the Microsoft bid may not have been in its best interest.*

## **8. Avoid long paragraphs.**

In basic writing classes before college, we were told to organize paragraphs around single ideas. When we get to a new idea, then we use a new paragraph. This is true, and perhaps a good way to teach beginning writing. It also can lead to some very bad results:

- A two-page memo that is all one paragraph because, well, the memo is all one idea, such as a response to an assignment question.
- Or a two-and-a-half page paragraph in a Core paper because all those words addressed a single idea that needed a lot of explanation and quotes.

Break up your writing into manageable paragraphs, and don't be rigidly attached to the "single idea" scheme. Arguably, any paper is all about one thing, such as the thesis. That doesn't mean the paper should be one long paragraph. Help the reader out by breaking up large masses of type into more readable paragraphs.

Sometimes, paragraphs might be quite short. Sometimes, much longer. Variation can add interest to your writing and that short paragraph can add emphasis to a key point.

## **9. Use tables and charts to communicate market data, financial results, product comparisons, strategy options, and other information.**

Notice how textbook authors present key information. They put it in tables so you can more easily grasp the ideas and details. You can do the same for memos and reports.

Here is a sample paragraph from a business plan:

*The marketing strategy described here will help grab market share from competitors. In our first year of operation, we believe we can achieve 4% share of market in a field of six other competitors. A second brand will help this increase to 9% in year two. In year three, the addition of a third brand will help boost market share to 16%. In year four, market share will reach 18%. By the fifth year of successful operations, and after the introduction of our fourth brand, we believe our products will achieve stable market share of about 24%.*

This sounds like a fine plan. Someone has thought through market share growth and connected it to marketing strategy, such as the introduction of new brands.

This is also tough for busy venture capitalists to read and remember – or to reference quickly in their meeting with the entrepreneurs.

Instead of putting those market share numbers in a long paragraph, summarize them in a table, like this:

*The marketing strategy described here will help grab market share from competitors. As illustrated in Table 1.1, market share is estimated to grow from 4% in the first year to 24% in the fifth year.*

**Table 1.1**  
**Estimated Market Share Growth:**

Year	Target Share	Brands
1	4%	1
2	9%	2
3	16%	3
4	18%	3
5	24%	4

It is always a good idea to number tables, charts and other exhibits and then refer to those in the text.

Tables are not reserved for marketing or financial numbers. Sometimes, tables are great ways to organize and quickly communicate key points, such as what is in these examples below.

**Table 3.2**

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Weaknesses</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Highest R&amp;D expenditures in the industry.</li> <li>• Second highest customer satisfaction ratings among 15 rated competitors.</li> <li>• Experienced executive management team.</li> <li>• Low debt and high cash positions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Slow to capitalize on innovations and features.</li> <li>• No participation in highest growing market segments.</li> <li>• Highest cost position among 15 competitors.</li> <li>• Deteriorating relationship with two key suppliers.</li> </ul>

**Table 1.2**  
**Summary of Competitor Positioning**

<b>Competitor</b>	<b>Market Position</b>
Video Dreams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High price, high quality.</li><li>• Niche focus on tech-oriented customers.</li></ul>
Astar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Value price and quality.</li><li>• Strong distribution to middle market through Best Buy, Target.</li><li>• CEO refers to a "Toyota strategy," cementing its dependability image.</li></ul>
Boom!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Low price, basic features.</li><li>• Aggressive follower.</li><li>• Aims for high volume to reduce costs and price 5% to 10% below competitors.</li></ul>

**10. Use of bullets to communicate key points.**

When writing a business memo or report, almost any time you have lists, factors, options, or choices, you can probably communicate these effectively using numbers or bullet listings. The use of bullets in item 1 above is a good example of bullet use. Those four bullets communicate quickly proper use of dollars. At least, the bullets communicate more quickly at a glance than had those items been buried in a paragraph.